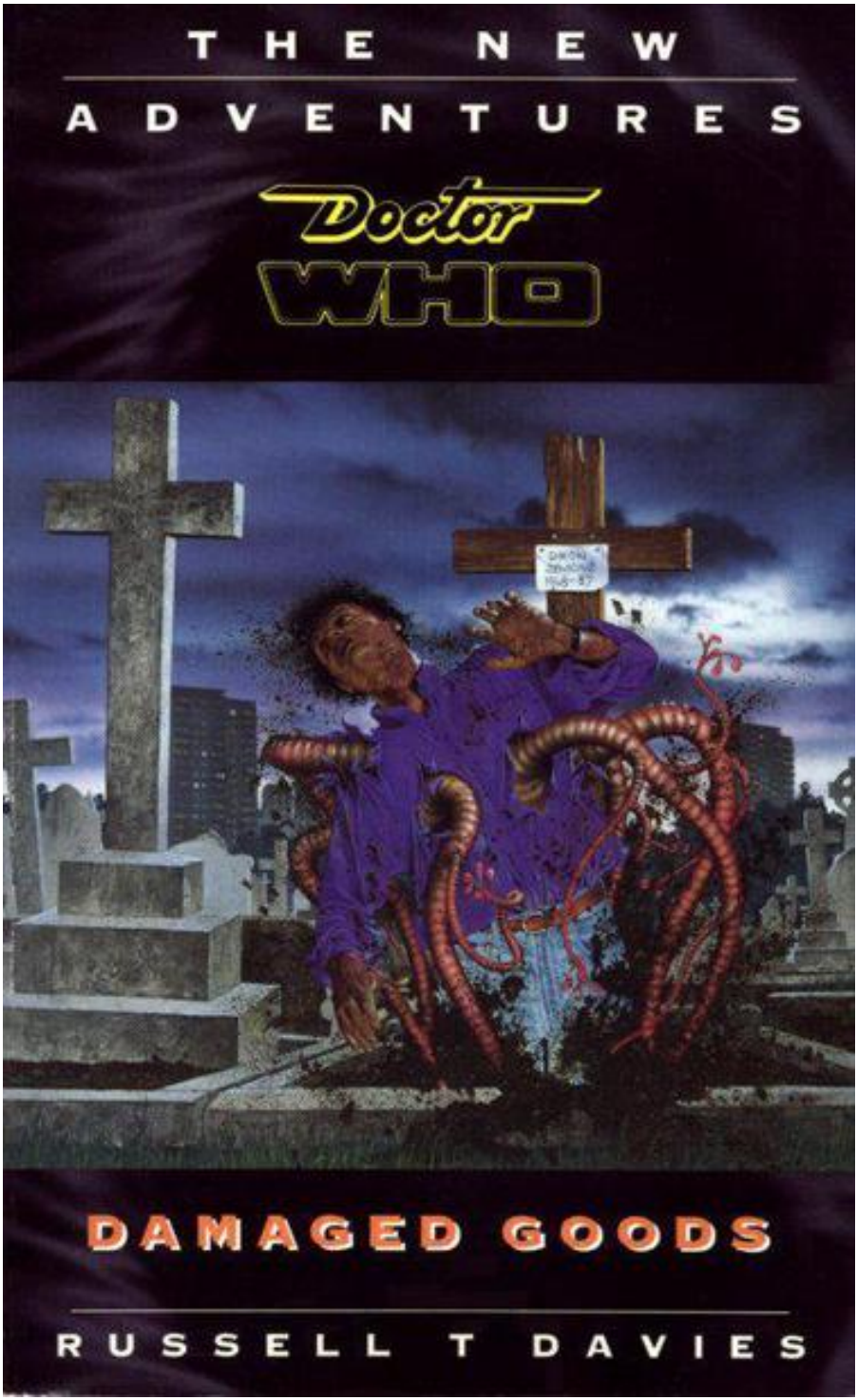
THE NEW ADVENTURES

Doctor WHO

DAMAGED GOODS

RUSSELL T DAVIES



‘WHEREVER THIS COCAINE HAS TRAVELLED, IT HASN’T GONE

ALONE. DEATH HAS BEEN ITS ATTENDANT. DEATH IN A REMARKABLY VIOLENT AND INELEGANT FORM.'

The Doctor, Chris and Roz arrive at the Quadrant, a troubled council Block in Thatcher's Britain. There's a new drug on the streets, a drug that's killing to a plan. Somehow, the very ordinary people of the Quadrant are involved.

And so, amidst the growing chaos, a bizarre trio moves into number 43.

The year is 1987: a dead drug dealer has risen from the grave, and an ancient weapon is concealed beneath human tragedy. But the Doctor soon discovers that the things people do for their children can be every bit as deadly as any alien menace – as he uncovers the link between a special child, an obsessive woman, and a desperate bargain made one dark Christmas Eve.

RUSSELL T DAVIES is an award-winning TV dramatist, having created the controversial adult soap opera **Revelations** and the acclaimed BBC

children's serials **Century Falls** and **Dark Season**. He loves Doctor Who, and all television.

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DAMAGED GOODS

Russell T Davies

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For Mum and Dad,

Janet, Susan and Tracy

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Chapter 1

24 December 1977

Bev lay awake, hoping that Father Christmas would come, but the Tall Man came instead.

She could hear his voice in the front room, but her mother's crying drowned his actual words. Mum had been upset all day, ever since she came home. Her mother had different sorts of tears – mostly anger, like when the kids from the Quadrant threw cigarette butts through the kitchen window; like when Carl got lost in the crowd on Jubilee Day, except he wasn't lost, he was drinking cider with Beefy Jackson's gang; or like when Dad left. But tonight, this was a crying Bev had never heard before.

Many years later, Bev would cry the same tears herself, and only then would she recognize what they meant. Only then, when it was too late.

Bev got out of bed to listen. She stepped over her Mister Men sack, as yet unvisited by Santa, and crept to the bedroom door. Carefully, sucking her bottom lip, she edged the door open a fraction, wondering what she would do if she saw another man threatening her mother. She'd be cleverer than last time, that's for sure.

Last time, two weeks ago, Bev had been woken by shouting – the voices of two men, both angry, but neither matching her mother's fury. Bev had run into the front room to find that one of the men had kicked the nest of tables into pieces. He waved a table leg in the air, threatening Mum. Bev threw herself at the second man – she only came up to his waist – and punched him with soft fists. He laughed, took hold of the collar on her cotton nightie and slapped her face. He wore a big, jewelled gold ring which tore open the skin on her cheek. Bev hardly remembered the slap. Her most vivid memory was of the sound of her nightie ripping, and she thought, it's new, it's brand-new last week and cost Mum a packet and she's gonna kill me for getting it ripped.

She was bleeding as she fell to the floor, and that seemed to change things.

Both men suddenly looked ashamed. Better still, Mum was in a Temper, and when she was in a Temper, no one stood a chance. Despite the pain now burning her cheek, Bev actually laughed as Mum grabbed the table leg off the first man and threw it away, then seized hold of his arm and pushed him towards the door. The second man stepped forward, but Temper made Mum 1

bigger somehow, made her able to take hold of both men at once and shove them on to the walkway outside. She slammed the door shut. The two men called out all sorts of threats – they were shouting about money, it was always about money – but without their earlier conviction. Now, they sounded like little boys name-calling. Mum walked over to Bev, picked her up and hugged her, smearing her own face with Bev's blood, and started to cry. That, Bev thought later, was a shame. Temper made Mum magnificent, but when she cried, it was as though she had lost.

And tonight, Christmas Eve, Mum must have lost very badly indeed, because she could only cry. Bev could see her through the gap between door and jamb. Mum was sitting in the brown tartan armchair, her shoulders heaving as she wept.

This time, Bev did not run to her mother's side – not out of fear of

being hit again, although the scar on her cheek was still a livid red. This time, Bev did not *dare* interrupt.

This time, the Tall Man was there.

Holding her breath, Bev inched round to see him. The front door was open and he filled the rectangle of night. He was almost a silhouette, but enough light spilled from the kitchen to pick out slices of clothing – along coat, jacket, tie, all in contrasting shades of black, his white shirt shining in two sharp triangles. His face was obscured, because of Mr and Mrs Harvey.

The Harveys owned the flat on the opposite side of the Quadrant, and every year, Mrs Harvey would fill her frontroom window with fairy lights. Not just one set, like those Mum had strung around the gas fire, but at least a dozen separate strands, woven into an electric cat's cradle. The different sets, each in a different colour, blinked at different times and at different speeds, and Bev would stare and stare in the hope that one day she would see a pattern, a sequence hidden within the tiny barbs of light, a secret that only Bev would know. But she never succeeded. The lights flickered on and off, apparently happy in their random chase, and if they had a secret, they kept it safe.

Now, the Tall Man stood in a direct line with the Harveys' display on the opposite walkway, and such was his height that the lights danced around his head in an inconstant halo. They seemed to draw all illumination away from the Tall Man's face, as if they had entered into his conspiracy and kept him in darkness.

The Tall Man did not move, but he spoke. His voice was a whisper, low enough to keep the exact words from Bev. In that whisper there was a terrible sadness, as though he spoke things to Bev's mother that must surely break her heart

Then he finished talking and stood there, unmoving. Bev watched, waiting for something to happen, but for a long time, nothing did. Mum stayed in the 2

armchair, staring at the floor, her back to the Tall Man as though she could not look into his shadow-face. Bev began to count, moving her lips but making no sound; her numbers were poor – Mum said she'd be in trouble when she started school – but she could make it to sixty in haphazard fashion, and Mum had told her that sixty meant one minute. She must have counted at least three sixties before Mum gave the Tall Man her answer. She nodded. In response, the Tall Man

stepped back and inclined his head, a strangely noble gesture which seemed to carry some respect for his audience.

Bev looked at her mother, noticing that her eye make-up had blurred into patches. She would get that face when watching a sad film on television, and when it ended she would hug Bev, laughing at herself, and call them her Badger Eyes. Normally, that made Bev laugh, but tonight the Badger Eyes did not seem funny at all. And when Bev looked towards the front door again, the Tall Man had gone.

Bev waited. Instinct told her not to approach her mother yet. She began to count more sixties. She must have completed seven or eight of them – she meant to keep count on her fingers, but kept forgetting – before her mother stood up and started pacing around the flat. Bev could not see what happened as Mum went out of her eyeline, and she didn't dare open the door any further.

She could tell from the familiar creaks of the doors that Mum had gone into the kitchen, then into Gabriel's room, then back into the front room. Bev put all her weight on to her left leg to get a better view, just in time to see Mum putting on her overcoat.

She was going out. And for the first time Bev felt properly frightened. The Tall Man had unsettled her but no matter who he was or what he wanted, that was grown-ups' business and Mum could handle that, but for her to go out without a babysitter broke the few slender rules which governed Bev's life.

Mum was leaving them.

Bev ran back to her bed and sat on it. She thought simply that if she didn't see her mother go, then it would not happen. But she heard the front door click open, then shut. Instantly, Bev was back on her feet, running into the front room and up to the door. She opened it and stared into the night.

It had been raining. Above, the untextured sky was coloured a dismal green by the lights of the city, and below, the slabs of concrete mirrored black, restor-ing the expected colour of night. There was nothing of Christmas here. Even Mr and Mrs Harvey's lights seemed distant, silly things. But Bev could see her mother, hurrying along the left-hand walkway towards the stairs. She was hunched over. For a second, she looked around, as though fearful of being seen, but she didn't look directly at the flat. Bev caught only a glimpse of her mother's expression: there was something wild and scared on her face,

like an animal, like the dogs that scavenged round the rubbish bins. Then Mum was 3

gone, breaking into a run as she reached the dark stairwell. Bev followed.

When she reached the ground floor, she panicked. Her mother could have chosen one of three pathways. Instinct made Bev run to the left, out of the Quadrant, and instinct proved her right. Mum was about one hundred yards away, standing on the corner. A car was parked beneath the lamppost, and beside the car stood the Tall Man.

Again, it was as if light conspired to render the Tall Man anonymous. The acid yellow of the streetlight drew a jagged, cartoonish strip across the top of his hair, hair so thick and black that it denied illumination to his down-turned face. And there they stood, the Tall Man and Bev's mum, both perfectly still, surrounded by the first spirals of a weak snow which would never settle.

Nothing else moved, nothing could be beard, as if the whole of December the twentyfourth had entered into their secret and mourned something lost.

Bev wanted to creep closer, but the edifice of the Quadrant kept her hidden, a binding shadow falling between Bev's home and the bulk of the Red Hamlets housing block opposite. So Bev waited and still they stood there, the Tall Man and Bev's mother, watched by a little girl. And one other.

Bev did not notice the man at first. He stood in one of Red Hamlets' side alleys, next to the skips, in darkness. He must have edged forward a fraction, ambient light revealing a smudged impression of his clothing: a cream jacket, splattered with mud, and a battered white hat. The rim of the hat should have kept his face hidden, like that of the Tall Man, but despite the dark and the distance, Bev could see his eyes. They were looking at her.

Bev forgot her mother's plight as she stared back at the little man. She thought he smiled at her, just a small smile, but one which gave no comfort.

Bev thought of her storybook: of tales in which brave knights battled across swamps and mountains, fought dragons and eagles and witches, all to reach a wise old man who might have the answer to a single question. Bev always imagined that these old, wise, terrible men must have long white beards and flowing robes, but now she realized that

they looked like this: small and crumpled and so very, very sad. The man lifted his head – Bev imagined he knew what she was thinking – then he returned his gaze to the two figures beneath the lamplight. Bev jerked her head in that direction also, flushed with a sudden shame that she had forgotten her mother, and she saw that the Tall Man was leaving. He got into his car. As the engine started, the noise seemed to wake the night out of its stillness. Young, drunk men could be heard singing, far off on the Baxter estate; on the top floor of the Quadrant, a Christmas party erupted into screams of laughter; and behind that, as ever, the faint rumble of traffic on the by-pass. It seemed to Bev that none of these sounds was new. They had always been there, but held back by the Tall Man's presence and now released once more.

4

Mum lifted her head to follow the car's progress, the streetlight picking out her sorrow, cheeks streaked with tears. Bev realized three things at once –

that she had nothing on her feet, that she'd left the front door open, that the little man had gone.

The alleyway opposite was empty except for two metal skips, piled high with boxes and junk and – Bev was sure this hadn't been there in daylight –

a big blue crate, at least eight feet tall, perched at a perilous angle on top of an old mattress. But Bev thought no more about it, because her mother had finally turned back. She was coming home.

Bev raced back to the flat, slamming the door shut behind her. A quick glance around the front room allayed her dread that thieves had stripped the place bare, which was something of a Christmas miracle in itself. She leapt into bed, quickly wiping her dirty, wet feet on the sheets. She shivered, only now feeling the cold, and she worried that her mother would come back to find her shaking and realize that she had spied on her. But for once, Mum did not look into her bedroom. Bev heard the front door click and guessed from the noises that Mum had settled in the armchair. After a few minutes, there came the sound that had first alerted Bev to the mystery, that of her mother crying.

After twenty minutes or so, Bev fell into an uneasy sleep. She dreamt of snow, of tall men and small men, and of terrible bargains being made at night.

25 December 1977

To Bev's surprise, Christmas was normal, better than normal.

Mum had

warned that they couldn't afford much, but she had done her best; there was a frozen chicken in the fridge, a pudding bought at the school fayre and a box of Matchmakers. But early that morning Mum went out – she must have trawled around the neighbours, begging and bartering – and she came back with broad beans, Paxo stuffing, cornflour for proper gravy, huge green and gold crackers, streamers, dry roasted peanuts, tins of ham and tongue, Mr Kipling apple tarts for tea, heaps of chocolate including After Eights, the ultimate luxury in Bev's eyes – and a bottle of Cointreau for herself. She had not been able to find extra presents, but she promised a trip to the shops the day after Boxing Day. The kids could have clothes, they could even have a pair of Kickers each, Gabriel could have brandnew outfits rather than Bev and Carl's hand-me-downs, and Bev could have whatever she liked from Debenham's toy department.

It was a wonderful day, but lurking beneath it all like an unwelcome relative was the question of where the money came from. Bev knew better than to ask, 5

and Carl, with the unspoken compliance that passes between children, also stayed silent. Bev, of course, saw the link between this unexpected wealth and the Tall Man's visitation, but as the day went on, his presence faded into the confusion of things dreamt, and Bev concentrated instead on what colour her Kickers were going to be.

There was only one flash of Mum's Temper, when Carl asked why old Mrs Hearn, their upstairs neighbour, had not called round – she usually did, every Christmas. Mum snapped at Carl to shut up, and Mrs Hearn was not mentioned again.

As Bev went to bed, stuffed full of new chocolate flavours and hugging her toy pony, she glimpsed the shadows of the previous evening once more. Mum was settled in the armchair with the bottle of Cointreau, which Bev would find empty on Boxing Day. And there was something in her mother's eyes, something which passed beyond tears, something dark and vast and adult.

Bev kissed her mother on the cheek, said it was the best Christmas ever and went to bed. The questions she did not ask went unanswered for almost ten years.

17 July 1987

The Capper was called the Capper because, it was said, he first kneecapped someone at the tender age of fourteen. Whether or not this was true, no one really knew – and there would be better and stranger stories to tell about the Capper in the weeks to come – but certainly it was a legend that the Capper himself enjoyed, and he encouraged its telling amongst those who worked for him. His real name was Simon Jenkins. One witness to events in the Quadrant at tea past two on that fine summer's day would testify that, somehow, it was the Simon Jenkins of old, not the Capper, who stood at the centre of the courtyard and set fire to himself.

There were many witnesses, all brought out by the merciless sun to bask on the walkways. David Daniels had found a deckchair and was lounging outside Harry's flat with a can of Carlsberg. The door to the flat had been stuck open with a rolled-up copy of *2000AD*, and in the background, Dinah Washington sang. David had raided Harry's wife's vinyl collection – Mrs Harvey would have joined David with a vodka in her hand if asthma had not killed her in the winter of '85 – so the soundtrack created a surreal counterpoint to the atrocity.

Further along the first floor, Mrs Skinner sat with her face up to the sun, tanning herself to disguise the bruises on her face. She nodded her head in time to the music but did not look at David, whose very existence she 6

found abhorrent. Beneath her, on the ground floor, Mr and Mrs Leather had fashioned a low bench out of a plank and two sacks of concrete which had set in the bag. If Mrs Skinner had known that her downstairs neighbours had emerged from their lair, she would have retreated indoors at once. There were many things about the world she did not understand, but even she knew why young girls kept calling at the Leathers' kitchen window. Summer had brought the Quadrant to a standstill but the business of prostitution kept going.

In the courtyard, old Mrs Hearn was just returning from Safeway's when the Capper stumbled past her, a can of petrol in one hand, a Zippo lighter in the other. When she saw him approaching, she altered her path a little to avoid him, but as he got closer, Mrs Hearn tried to initiate eye contact, because something was obviously wrong.

As a rule, the Capper was a man to be left alone, and Mrs Hearn was glad to comply. But she had seen him grow up, and now she was reminded of the introverted little boy who used to play in the

Quadrant on his own in the mid-Seventies: a solitary soul, running around with some fictitious child's war being enacted in his head. Mrs Hearn used to feel sorry for him, and would sometimes buy him a bar of chocolate, which he accepted with a sullen nod and a muttered 'thanks'. By the age of eight, that troubled little boy had disappeared as he joined the Crow Gang and lost the trappings of youth with frightening speed. Within six years, he had become leader of the Crows and then dismantled the group with the deed which earned him his nickname. It was said that he'd grown tired of their childish games of joy-riding and petty thieving, and discarded his friends in order to move up into the big league.

All this, Mrs Hearn knew from local gossip. After that, details became vaguer as the Capper moved into worlds in which women's gossip played no part.

But Mrs Hearn saw nothing to fear in the Capper today. Instead, like so many years ago, she felt pity. 'Simon?' she said quietly as he went past her, but he seemed not to hear. He was whispering to himself. 'Get out get out get out,' Mrs Hearn heard him say. His eyes were unnaturally wide and un-focused, and his lower lip hung loose, drooling like a baby, as he shambled on his terrible mission. Mrs Hearn watched him approach the centre of the Quadrant, and she wondered what the petrol was for. A barbecue, perhaps.

Then she changed her mind as he poured the petrol over himself and flicked the lighter open.

Mrs Hearn had lived eighty-seven years, and despite two world wars, she had never screamed aloud in public. As she did so for the first time, she found herself screaming the wrong words. All she could think of was 'I bought you chocolate'.

The words made David Daniels poke his head over the edge of the parapet. The beer and the sun had made him drunk, and he thought Mrs Hearn 7

had simply lost it at last. He was smiling and Dinah Washington was singing

'Everybody Loves Somebody', as he realized that Mrs Hearn was shouting at the Capper. David had always given the Capper a wide berth, but he admired his clothes. He slipped on his glasses and studied the Capper's weekend wardrobe: Gaultier suit, maybe six hundred quid, the tie was probably Thierry Mugler, maybe forty to

fifty quid, and the shoes –

The shoes were on fire. And the suit. And the Capper himself. David shouted, 'Oh my God, stop him –!' He leapt to his feet, but not another word would come out, as it registered that the Capper was not moving: he was still standing, still alive, but as the fire cocooned his body, he did nothing to extinguish it. The initial rush of blue flame then yellowed into ripples, and David could only stare at the fire's beautiful cascade.

Further along the walkway, Mrs Skinner was looking at David, about to complain that he had taken the Lord's name in vain. Then she stood and saw the Capper and started screaming. Beneath her, Mr and Mrs Leather sat on their bench, cigarettes in hand, transfixed and warmed by the human inferno.

It took at least ten seconds for a wry smile to spread across Jack Leather's face. Normally, he wasn't so slow to anticipate an increase in profits.

Then the Capper did move, a slow gesture, almost luxurious. He lifted two burning arms to heaven and inclined the pyre of his head backwards with astonishing grace. He looked like a man in prayer. The suit of flame rendered his expression invisible, but all those watching knew to their horror that he was smiling.

The stench of burning man filled the square and greasy black smoke spiralled up to the baleful sun. David Daniels, Mrs Hearn and the Leathers kept staring, Mrs Skinner went on screaming and Dinah Washington moved on remorselessly to sing 'Mad About the Boy'. But the Capper wasn't dead yet.

14.31: Simon Jenkins aka the Capper arrived in an ambulance at South Park Hospital and at

14.32 he was wheeled into Crash, surrounded by staff who went through the motions, fetching oxygen and cold compresses with speed but little conviction. They knew a corpse when they saw one. The paramedics insisted there was still a heartbeat, but the houseman on duty, Dr Polly Fielding, thought this was desperate hope rather than medical fact. She watched a nurse attempting intravenous cannulation, but the skin was a jigsaw of hardened black plates sliding on a red-raw subcutaneous layer, and she was about to tell her team to stand back and call it a day, when at

14.34 the body convulsed and one eye opened. The staff immediately

in-tensified their actions, glad to find tasks that would stop them looking into that living eye. Dr Fielding ordered a student nurse to get the consultant, 8

called for more Hartmann's solution, instructed that the patient be given morphine, and then at

14.35 the Capper sat up. It was a motion so sudden that it seemed like the action of jointed metal. One of the nurses screamed as the second eye opened and a grey jelly flopped out of the socket. But the Capper's good eye had seen what he needed: the nurse standing ready with the morphine. His right arm shot out, showering charcoal skin, and his skeletal hand seized the hypodermic. Then he plunged the needle into his forehead, and at 14.36 he achieved his aim. The Capper died, for the moment. His determined suicide would become the stuff of hospital folklore and few would realize, as they told tales both real and apocryphal, that Simon Jenkins aka the Capper was the same figure who would soon take centre stage in a far darker, far bloodier legend of modem times. But all that was to come, and at 14.39 Dr Fielding ordered her staff to go and have a bloody good cup of tea. She set about filling in the death certificate, little knowing that the actions of this still-hot corpse would lead, in ten days' time, to her own spectacular death.

25 July 1987

Since his wife died in the winter of '85, Harry Harvey went to Smithfield Cemetery at least once a week. But Sylvie Harvey was buried in Horsham Cemetery, on the other side of town. Harry went to Smithfield, always at night, for reasons other than remembrance.

It was five past eleven at night, but the smallest hints daylight nagged at the horizon; the summer had started three days before the Capper's suicide and continued still, eight days later, bleaching the clumps of wild grass around the gravestones to straw.

The cemetery was just getting busy. Harry kept his distance – he always did – but groups of men had started gathering around the long-since defunct fountain. There was the smell of chips, and someone had brought a tape deck playing 'Hunting High and Low' at a barely audible volume. The mournful song drifted across the night, linking disparate strangers together in a shared memory of younger fitter times.

This was the friendliest of cruising grounds. There was also a park,

which Harry had visited a dozen or so times in the Seventies, and of course the cot-tages, which Harry never dared to approach, most of them standing along main roads. And there was the canal – specifically, a frightening scoop of shadow beneath Lovell Bridge, in which silhouettes could be discerned in frantic motion against the water's dark glimmer. Harry had only been there once, 9

very drunk but instantly sober as he negotiated his way along the narrow tow-path pressing against indifferent, busy strangers. He did not stay. When he got home Sylvie and David Daniels were sitting on the sofa, experimenting with Tia Maria, hooting with laughter at a video of *Dynasty*. Neither noticed the cold of sweat on his forehead and neither heard anything as Harry went to the bathroom and threw up. He went to bed. Sylvie joined him a couple of hours later, having tucked David into the sofa-bed with silly, babyish endearments. She slumped on to the mattress, giggly and wheezing after too many cigarettes. She was amazed when Harry took hold of her, clamped stubbly lips against hers and pushed her back on to the bed for fast, unscheduled sex.

'It must be my birthday,' she laughed, but Harry said nothing as he heaved on top of her, for once unaware of David listening in the next room.

He never went to the canal again, but then a friend of a friend mentioned Smithfield Cemetery, and Harry became a regular. It was altogether less hostile. Many of the men at the fountain seemed uninterested in sex, content to sit in groups, whispered chat carrying across the flat expanse, the occasional comic insult ricocheting from one group to another. Sometimes, in winter, they would light a fire in the fountain's dry bowl, and watch those engaged in more primal pursuits with an amused eye. Above all, this was what kept the cemetery safe. The central core – men both young and old, who would come here every single night – acted as an unofficial security patrol, when police or queerbashers came calling.

Harry came here five or six times a year when Sylvie was alive, once or twice a week since she died. He always kept his distance. Some of the core group had begun to smile at him, even to say hello, but Harry kept his head down and stuck to the fringes, skulking along the paths radiating out from the fountain. He kept to the grass verges, wary of making his footsteps heard on the gravel. He never returned the greetings. After all, he wasn't the same as them.

He still felt nervous; he thought he could come here for a thousand

years and never lose the tight grip of tension around his guts when he approached the cemetery gates. And that tension fevered into a pounding of blood in his ears on the rare occasion he was actually approached.

He didn't think he'd be lucky tonight, although that could be a godsend.

All too often, he would have to suffer some idiot wanting to *talk* once the sex was finished. Harry hated nothing more than fumbling with his fly whilst having to conduct some inane chat – what's your name?, been out tonight?

and even, do you come here often?, usually delivered with a snigger. Tonight, Harry thought, he wouldn't have to endure that. He'd give it five more minutes, maybe fifteen, then go home. No doubt David would be there, lounging on the settee with his comics, and he would slope out to the kitchen to make 10

Harry a cuppa, asking about his evening and making lurid suggestions about the working-men's clubs in which Harry purported to spend his time. 'These straight pubs, they're all the same,' he would call out in the sing-song of deliberate camp, the same routine every time. 'Hairy-arsed men who spend all day squeezed up next to each other in factories and locker rooms. And at night, do they go home to the wife? Do they buggery. They're back out with their mates again, till they're drunk enough to put their arms round each other. And they say, you're my mate, you are, I love you, I do. Now if that's not gay I don't know what is. Sometimes I wonder about you, Harry, I really do.' Then he would giggle at Harry's sour face and return to the kettle.

When Harry first heard David's fanciful spiel – in the early days, when David had arrived as Sylvie's friend, rather than unofficial lodger and now, it seemed, permanent flatmate – Harry had felt sick. It was as if David had taken one look at him and he knew, he knew. For a long time after that, Harry abandoned the cruising grounds. But as David became more of a fixture, Harry heard the 'all straight men are gay' litany repeated so often in reference to so many different men – usually the famous, the handsome, and children's TV presenters – that it lost its power. Harry did not resume his lonely late-night forages yet; there still existed the dread that one day, the voice in the dark asking 'what's your name?' would be David's. But one day Harry overheard Sylvie and David in the kitchen. Harry and Sylvie had just returned from Malaga, and she was attacking the duty-free vodka and Silk Cut with a vengeance, David her willing partner in Sylvie had

discovered slammers – no tequila but vodka would do –

and she and David had already broken one of the Esso glasses, when the subject of cruising cropped up. One of David's fellow barmen had been caught with his trousers down in the Maitland Road toilets, along with seven others.

' *Seven?* ' Sylvie had screamed. 'I'm missing out here. I should get a leather harness and join in.'

'You'll have to go to hospital first,' said David.

'What for?'

'A strapadictomy.'

Both had laughed and laughed, and more glasses were slammed, and Harry left his chair to edge closer to the kitchen as the conversation became more serious.

'You wouldn't do that would you, David? Go to those places.'

'Anywhere I can get it, love.'

More laughter, and the sound of a cigarette lighter, then Sylvie persisted.

'You wouldn't, though?'

'Oh, get off. They're for sad bastards. And anyway, I'd be scared to death.

Even if you don't get murdered, you could be halfway into some bloke's knick-ers before you realize it's your old Maths teacher.' Sylvie spluttered on her 11

vodka, her breath already laboured, as David continued, 'Maybe when I'm fat and fifty, not before.' Harry heard the scrape of a chair, Sylvie was coming into the front room to fetch her ventolin inhaler. Harry nipped back to his chair, and as Sylvie rummaged through her handbag, he quietly announced that he might just pop out to the club to catch up with his friends. He went straight to the park and lost himself to a violent, beery biker up against a midnight tree.

Someone was looking at him.

Harry had been so engrossed in thoughts of his late wife and David

Daniels that he had not noticed the man circling round, then stand opposite the bench.

Harry had seen him earlier, and had dismissed him with regret. Generally, Harry found himself with men of his own age or older, and encountered young, clean, silent men only in his fantasies. Therefore it had been natural to assume that this man – he might almost say boy – would have no interest in a balding, stooped garage clerk. But the man was staring; he was staring at Harry, and he smiled, and Harry felt his stomach twist and he wanted to go home and he wanted to stay and he wanted a closer look –

As if responding to Harry's desire, the man lit a cigarette. The yellow flare revealed thick black eyebrows as straight as a slash of felt-pen, a sharp nose and jaw, and eyes that were definitely, *definitely* looking at Harry. The light died, but Harry could still see the man gesture with a flick of the head – *come with me* – and then disappear into the solid shadow of the copse.

Harry was sweating. He felt his shirt cling with sudden cold under his arms and down his back, and the blood pounded in his ears, and as he followed he thought, I'll go home in a minute, I'll just take a look then I'll go home.

The man was standing at the edge of the trees, leaning against a headstone.

Harry stood about fifty yards away, and both men entered into the peculiar mating rituals of these secret places. Harry walked forward a little, then stood still, then looked left and right, both to check for interested or dangerous parties and to convey, hopelessly, an air of non-chalance. Then Harry advanced a few steps more, stopped and repeated the actions, while at regular intervals the man would take a deep drag on the cigarette, to illuminate the fact that his stare was still fixed on Harry. And so the dance went on, until both stood three feet from another. The act of closure demanded physical contact, which Harry would never have initiated but for this man's skin. Up close, it was like alabaster, a breathtaking white, unspoiled by moles or wrinkles or spots. The stranger was like a drawing of the perfect man; so for once in his life, Harry took the final step. He moved in, to touch him. Then he felt the knife against his chest.

Harry Harvey thought many things simultaneously. Principally, he thought, I'm going to die. At the same time, he thought of his shame branded across the local papers, of his colleagues at the garage

waiting for him in the fridge, of his mother. And he thought of the dead Sylvie, of the many evenings she would sit with him and talk about David, saying, 'I know he's gay and I you don't like it, love. But that's your problem, not his. He's suffered enough without your miserable face greeting him every time he comes to the door.' Harry saw the Sylvie who would greet him in the afterlife, ready to call out his hypocrisy to all who waited there, and he thought, I'm falling into Hell.

'Money.' That was all the man said: 'Money Harry could smell curry and nicotine on his breath, and the knife pressed harder against him. If he shouted for help, he would be saved, yet he would rather die than call out. Men had been attacked here before, and one shout from the darkness would bring the fountain men running. But such men, thought Harry. All of them queers, wasted deviant men with whom he refused to associate. If they came, he would have to talk to them. They would save him and comfort him and hold him, and they would ask his name. Harry could not suffer that. He would stay silent, for if they saved him, he would become one of them.

'Money,' said the man again, and Harry raised his hands in a dumb-show of poverty. He always left his wallet in the car, anticipating such a confrontation; like a child's superstition, the anticipation defied the event to occur. The man leant forward, reached around Harry to check his trouser pockets, squeezing the buttocks in a parody of what Harry had expected. Then he stepped back to check Harry's jacket, and he swore, realizing that Harry was telling the truth.

They stared at each other for one, two, three seconds and then the man simply decided to kill him.

Harry felt the blade pierce his skin, and he was resigned to thinking, this is it, this is dying, as he felt surprisingly little pain, only the warm gush of blood down his chest. Calm, as though a mere observer of the event, Harry looked down at – the bloom of liquid – black, in this light – spreading across his shirt, the shirt David had ironed for him. And then there was more blood, a less elegant array, a wild splatter reminding Harry of school, when his mother had bought him a fountain pen for his first day at secondary grammar and shook the pen to get it working and covered his exercise book with ink, and little Harry stayed silent, unwilling to signal his shame by calling for help –

– when it occurred to him that this wasn't his blood. He looked up.

His attacker's head was lolling curiously, and the eyes were puzzled, pretty once more, and his white T-shirt was deep red, absorbing so great a quantity of blood that the night could not deny its colour. The man's throat had been slit open, a wide Muppet mouth at the base of his neck. And there was someone standing behind him

Some *thing*.

This third party had a head, torso, two arms and two legs, but Harry

could not mistake it for human because of the illumination that came from its mouth. A small, silent furnace of white light blazed from the back of its throat, throwing into relief the many fingers of its face. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands of these digits, impossibly long, as thin as fish-bone – Harry thought of a prawn's spindly legs – extending from the creature's forehead, cheeks and chin to dig into the thug's skull.

All of this, Harry accepted. His brain had become a mew cataloguer of events, recording events with the impassivity of a camera. The support functions of reason and emotion had withdrawn, running away shrieking like cartoon women from cartoon mice. So Harry kept watching, and he even took a polite step backwards to allow the butchery more space.

The needle fingers were burrowing towards the front of the thug's face, tiny furrows forging beneath the alabaster skin and then lifting, sheets of skin detaching themselves like wet paper. The nose split in half with a moist squelch, a curtain of flesh being drawn open for the underlying bone's debut. The me-thodical stripping continued as delicate secondary fingers arced across to take the separated tissue back to their host. These fingers then retracted under the surface of the creature's head – a rough, blackened surface, Harry noted, like something burnt – leaving the appropriated skin on top. The alabaster patchwork shivered, as if being knitted into place from beneath, and yet more fingers appeared at the edge of each patch, sucking away excess blood and smoothing the soft material, almost lovingly. Within thirty seconds, the dead thug's face had been stripped to a pulp, and the creature had achieved the semblance of a new skin. Larger, thicker appendages sprouted from the top of its skull – they glinted in the unnatural light, revealing themselves not as bone, but metal – and they began to tug out the thug's eyes and hair. Chunks of flesh and organ were transferred back to the creature, carried like leaves atop an army of ants.

At the same time, Harry noted – in the functional manner with which he would check a charge sheet for typographical error – the same process of stripping and transplantation continuing along the length of both bodies. The creature's right leg had split open, a second shin extending at ninety degrees from the body to penetrate the thug's corresponding limb. Smaller devices unfurled from the strut, softer fingers shivering like an underwater anemone, whittling away at the denim and the skin underneath.

Then the creature snapped its mouth shut, the internal furnace visible only through slits between the teeth. It seemed to be smiling at Harry – in fact, this was only a rictus, as the lips were still sliding from left to right, uncertain of their correct position. But this wasn't what brought Harry back to reality.

Rather, it was the fact that he now recognized the creature.

Harry looked at the Capper, and the Capper looked at Harry with stolen 14

eyes, then Harry felt his bowels loosen, oven as he began to run.

The men at the fountain had been watching the trees throughout, alert, heads twitching in unison like nervous meerkats. Their view was obscured by the bushes. They had seen the pretty boy slink into the brittle foliage, followed by the regular they had christened 'Harry Worth', little knowing had got his first name right. They had thought the coupling unlikely, but not suspicious, and toasted the old man's success by swigging cans of Heineken and slapping the Pet Shop Boys into the tape deck: 'It's a Sin'.

The light stopped their gossip: a small, intense burn piercing the bushes'

cover, at the exact location where they presumed the two men to be standing, or kneeling, or whatever they were into. Those sitting had stood, and those already on their feet had stepped forward a pace. Unexpected light usually meant a police torch. But because the light was stationary and no voices could be heard, no one ran forward. In time, the light had been extinguished, and seconds later, Harry Worth came running on to the path. As soon as he was clear of the undergrowth, they saw him slow down and move away in an awkward, panicky walk, as if aware of being watched. This made the men assume that all was normal. Old Harry had a habit of running away from his tricks.

The group relaxed. Although the pretty boy did not reappear, they assumed he had made his way through the copse to exit the cemetery by jumping over the railings, on to Baxter Road, where many late-night cruisers left their cars.

And about twenty minutes later, when a third man stepped out from the same area, they presumed he had entered via this route. The new arrival was something of an oddity and attracted attention, even some muted laughter. Someone labelled this newcomer 'Betty Ford', because he was obviously drunk. The man shambled away, following Harry Worth's path with considerable difficulty. He seemed to have trouble with one leg and kept shaking it to correct the fault as he weaved a comic path to the gates. They thought they heard him whistling. The tune was dislocated, but it might have been 'Mad About the Boy'.

They soon forgot him. An hour passed. Then two men lovers, not strangers, embarking on a joint fantasy of open air sex – wandered towards the trees.

And their shouts brought the fountain men running.

They found a corpse and an open grave, and assumed naturally, but wrongly – that the one had come from the other. The naked body was a bloody, wet mass, like something dropped from a great height, save for the fact that its sprawled skeleton was intact. Nearby, mounds of dry soil bracketed a six-feet deep hole, and if this had been a time for logic, someone might have noted that the earth seemed to have been heaved upwards from below, 15

rather than shovelled from above. The grave did not yet have a permanent headstone. Its only marker was a lopsided balsa-wood cross, stencilled with the words 'Simon Jenkins, 1968–1987'.

Without a word, the men vanished into the night, never to return to this particular haunt. Someone made an anonymous call to the police, blurting out a confused, tearful message concerning bodysnatchers and mutilation, but by the time a police car arrived at Smithfield Cemetery, only the teenage corpse lay in wait.

Harry returned to his Quadrant flat at quarter to twelve. He had retrieved a forgotten, shabby winter coat from the boot of the car. Sylvie's ghost whispered at his side, 'That old thing. You shame me, Harry, wearing that old thing.' He clutched the coat around him, to hide the bloodstains. His hand was shaking as he fumbled with the lock – really shaking, no small tremor but a violent judder which left

the key six inches wide of its target. As he finally got the door open, it occurred to Harry that at least the smallest shred of luck had come his way at last: David was out.

Harry ran around the flat, fearful that his lodger would return at any second. He stripped naked, bundling his clothes into a black bin liner, the shirt stained an attractive carmine, the trousers and pants soiled. He threw down the bin liner at the end of his bed, then ran to the bathroom to scrub and scrub and scrub. He stood in the bath, the shower attachment in one hand, nail-brush in the other, scouring his overweight frame. But the blood would not go. It took long, brutal minutes of scrubbing for Harry to realize that every time he wiped his stomach clean, new blood ran out to replace the old.

He had forgotten that he had been stabbed in the chest, and still felt no pain there. In his confusion, he had thought – hoped – that the flick-knife had not cut him, that all the blood on his front came from his assailant's gaping throat.

But now he looked down at the two-inch flap carved between his breasts, like a ragged, misplaced mouth, and he knew he would never be clean.

He unravelled an entire toilet roll and clasped the tissue to his chest, staunching the flow while he sprayed the bath clean of red and pale-pink droplets. Then he ran to the kitchen, grabbing hold of the first-aid box, then into the living room, where he found David's gin, then into his bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him. There, he hunted out Sylvie's old sewing kit.

He couldn't go to hospital, they'd ask questions, they'd take one look at him and they'd *know*. He had to stitch the wound himself. As he sat on the bed and fumbled for cotton and thread, his protruding belly grew slimy with fresh blood, which pooled around him and soaked into the bedsheets.

He took an age to thread the needle, but this was necessary time in which Harry could make sense of what had happened tonight; a sense which bore 16

little relation to reality, but no matter. It would enable him to survive the coming days.

He had seen a creature, something in the shape of a man, and therefore, perhaps a man after all. What else could it be? Undoubtedly a man, because in the end, Harry had been reminded of the Capper

And no wonder, since Harry knew that the Capper was buried in Smithfield Cemetery, so naturally he confused the creature – the man – with his suicidal neighbour.

As Harry thought this through, nodding and sweating and muttering to himself, he finally slipped the black cotton through the needle's eye.

So it wasn't the Capper, and it wasn't some monster either. That insane thought had been given shape by the graveyard setting, nothing more. *But its head, Harry, its head.* A face full of fingers and a throat on fire –

Harry stared at the needle, and wondered what to do next. He picked up the gin, swallowed a mouthful, then splashed some over the wound, out of some vague notion that alcohol acted as both antiseptic and anaesthetic.

– such a head couldn't exist and therefore didn't exist, except in films, where they were concocted out of plastic and latex. Masks. So it made sense that what he had seen tonight was a mask also, made out of burnt wood, fish-bone and steel wire.

Then Harry pinched the two flaps of skin together in a puckered kiss, and plunged the needle in. For a blissful moment, he forgot his ruthless rational-ization as pain zigzagged through him. The knife wound had not hurt but the needle shocked his entire system, in the way that a splinter can be more specific and more grievous than a punch in the face. He bit his lip, desperate to stay silent, then reached for the gin and swallowed some more, dribbling alcohol down his chin. The pain ebbed into a dull ache, and Harry plunged the needle down to complete the stitch. It hurt again, no less than the first time, but Harry reasoned that, unlike a flickknife, it wouldn't kill him, and could be endured. He sewed on, and his mind resumed writing the palimpsest over this evening's events.

A mask, yes, of course, it had been a mask – he'd mistaken it for something real because of the dark. And yes, there had been a light from the creature's mouth, but surely it had been some sort of bulb, battery-powered, designed to make the mask more frightening. The more he thought about the light, the dimmer it became, a weak glow deriving from a bulb no bigger than those in Sylvie's Christmas web. And although terrible things had happened in that dim wattage, they had happened to the other man, the bastard with alabaster skin. There had been a murder, he couldn't deny that, but the murder of someone

who deserved it. Yes, retribution had come to his would-be killer in the bizarre shape of a masked avenger, but for that, Harry should be glad. The thing – the man – had saved his life.

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Harry completed the fifth, final stitch and double-chinned his head down to bite the cotton free. Then he tied the loose end in a knot and looked at the thread woven through his skin, a vivid graffito. He was still bleeding, more than before, and additional blood trickled from the stitch-holes. But it was finished. Harry dug a tube of Savlon out of the first-aid box and smeared thick white worms of antiseptic across his chest. Then he found the largest sticking plaster in the box, ripped off the wrapping and slapped it over the wound.

'Harry? You all right?'

David had come home. He was tapping softly at the bedroom door, his voice hesitant. Only then did Harry realize that he had been sobbing aloud, and David continued, 'Is anything wrong?'

Harry was later appalled by the ease with which an excuse came to mind.

He just said, in a remarkably clear voice, 'Sylvie.' There was a pause, as David assumed that Harry was mourning his dead wife, then he called gently, 'Call me if you need anything. I'm going to bed. But wake me up if you need me.'

Another silence, and Harry held his breath. Then David said, 'We all miss her, Harry. 'Night.' Harry strained to hear the footsteps as David pottered about in the kitchen, then went to the toilet, then went to sleep on the sofa.

Harry lay back on his blood- and gin-stained bed, and wondered if he would ever sleep again. The pain in his chest was clawing from within – oh yes, the knife wound hurt now, it waited until it had Harry's full attention and then crawled out of its hole on jagged legs, dancing with glee – but he welcomed it, for it proved he was still alive. As he dared to relax, Harry was unaware of delirium stealing upon him: the needle was still pinched between his fingers and now felt thick and blunt, more the size of a pencil; the gin in his mouth acquired a sickly-sweet flavour; and the black bin liner at the foot of the bed stared back at Harry, like an engorged, shiny beetle. But as images distorted in his hall-of-mirrors mind, his new rationale stayed intact. David's interruption had come at the right time, crystallizing the rewrite into

fact and banishing further doubts. Harry had almost been killed, but his killer had been killed instead. As simple as that.

Eventually, in the early hours of the morning, Sylvie came to Harry: beautiful Sylvie, resplendent in jade-green, jewels at her neck, just as she had been dressed on the night she died. And Sylvie, smiling and gracious and forgiving, took hold of Harry's hand and led him into unconsciousness.

Gabriel Tyler liked to watch the Quadrant at night. The bedroom overlooking the centre had belonged to his brother Carl, but Gabriel had asked to swap, and like most things he asked for in his special way, it was granted. By standing on his bed he could overlook the parapet and see the comings and goings.

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It was late, and his mother would be angry if she knew he was awake. He had almost incurred her Temper today, when she had seen his friend Sam waving a soft-porn magazine and had guessed correctly that Gabriel had studied it, but Gabriel had smiled at her, said nothing, and her Temper had abated. It was a special talent of his, averting Mum's wrath, one which earned Bev and Carl's envy – but when they went to complain, Gabriel just smiled at them, too, and they said nothing.

Gabriel slept little. Mum kept saying that everyone needed a good eight hours' rest each night, especially nine-year-old boys, but Gabriel was content with a vague half-hour's drifting, semi-conscious, between three and four o'clock. He kept this as his little secret, thinking it would stand him in good stead when he was Carl's age, free to go out to pubs and clubs. He filled in the extra hours by doing absolutely nothing. He would just sit on his bed and imagine faces and places, sketching them into a noughts-and-crosses grid. At other times, he would simply watch the Quadrant, which had nocturnal secrets of its own.

By arching his feet on to tip-toe, he could just about see the Leathers' flat, below and to the left. Every so often, teenage and barely teenage girls would scurry up to Irene Leather's kitchen window, hand over money, then drift away. Business as usual, thought Gabriel, and he smiled. Apart from that, the Quadrant was quiet tonight. There was a lot less action since the Capper died. His ground-floor flat, opposite the Leathers' – one of the Capper's many homes, Gabriel knew, and barely a home at all, more of an office – was dark and empty. After his

death eight days ago, the door had been sealed off with yellow police tape, as had the central section of the Quadrant. Several paving-stones were still scorched. Old Mrs Hearn from the flat above had tried washing them down, but the stain persisted. After a few days, the yellow tape had fallen and drifted like the remnants of an unsuccessful party.

Local kids – some of them Gabriel's friends – had thrown stones through the Capper's windows. Then the council's Direct Works Department had moved in with atypical speed to board up the windows and padlock the door.

At quarter to twelve, Gabriel saw Mr Harvey coming home. The old man was running, which Gabriel found funny, and he was wrapped in a thick grey coat, which was ridiculous on such a warm night. Twenty minutes later, David Daniels followed in Mr Harvey's footsteps. Gabriel never believed the play-ground stories about the two men's relationship; he had an uncanny knack for divining the truth of every new rumour, especially if he knew the people involved.

Then, a few minutes later, something far more interesting occurred. Someone else limped into the square and approached the Capper's abandoned flat.

It – *he*, why did Gabriel think ' *it*'? – studied the padlock. Then it – *he* – looked 19

at Gabriel's bedroom window, and suddenly Gabriel was scared. He ducked down. He waited, half-enjoying the instinctive fear. Above his head was a child's mobile, blu-tacked to the ceiling, cut-out swans suspended from thin rods. Now, although no breeze disturbed the room, the mobile began a gentle revolve of its own volition.

It was still spinning when, a minute or two later, Gabriel pecked his head over the windowsill once more. The newcomer had gone and the padlock on the Capper's door had been torn off. Gabriel found the thought repeating in his head: business as usual.

He resumed his vigil over the Quadrant, his implacable smile back in place, unworried by a surreal thought: for a second, he had imagined that the stranger was the Capper himself, as though the dry summer's night had sucked moisture out of the earth with such zeal that it had inadvertently pulled the Capper from his tomb, and he had stumbled home for want of anything better to do. Certainly, the newcomer had been exactly the same height and shape as the Capper, but one detail

made this notion all-the-more impossible.

Gabriel had seen the thing's – man's face illuminated by the security lights, and whereas the Capper had been black, of Afro-Caribbean descent, the man now squatting in his flat was white, very white indeed. Alabaster white.

The Quadrant drifted from July the twenty-fifth to July the twenty-sixth with only the small, smiling face of Gabriel Tyler standing sentinel over the ugly planes of concrete and wood. His brother and sister and mother slept around him, in flat 41. Directly above, in flat 67, old Mrs Hearn's arthritic hands clutched the bedsheets in anxious sleep. She was haunted by the smell of petrol for the ninth night in a row.

Opposite and down one floor in number 28, David Daniels dreamt of Morten Harket while Harry Harvey dreamt of a merciful nothing, blood forming a dark crust around him. On the ground floor, in flat 22, the Leathers drank coffee and counted their money, and opposite them, in flat 11, Simon Jenkins aka the Capper aka something-that-had-yet-to-be-named found, with something approximating delight, that the phone was still working. He began to dial.

Business as usual.

Chapter 2

New York had not yet finished with July the twenty-fifth. It was early evening and the monoliths of Manhattan seemed to have stored the heat all day long, releasing it now and damning its inhabitants' hopes of a cool night ahead. Rita was sweating like a pig, and around her, the customers looked as if their faces were glazed with butter. The air conditioning had broken down and engineers couldn't be found for love nor money, not even for a fancy joint like this. In her old job, Rita would have swilled her face from the ice-bucket whether the manager liked it or not. But that was her old job, serving in a run-down SoHo diner, before she'd moved up in the world. This new job was smart, it had class, it had tips the size of a week's pay and she wasn't going to blow it, not this time, no sir. So she tightened her bandanna and kept smiling, especially at the customers she wanted to punch.

Up till now, it hadn't been a good year for Rita. Two days after she turned forty, she'd received an eviction order from her brownstone

flat on West 45th Street. The landlord had sold the building to some Chinese – triads, whispered her neighbours, so Rita figured it wasn't worth taking the case to tribunal. She didn't want to walk home one night only to have some kid run out of an alley, swoop down and slice the tendons in her heel. Finding accommodation in New York was a nightmare, but preferable to being crippled.

Eventually she had found a studio flat overlooking the East Side docks. For

'studio flat', read 'a room'. Rita swore it was separated from the adjoining flat by a sheet of hardboard alone. So she found herself at the age of forty – too soon, too damn *soon* – the proud owner of a single room, without the cash to pay for even half a gram of coke.

Then the good luck came. She started sleeping with Bobby, and landed one of the neatest jobs in the city. Bobby had contacts who owed him favours, about which Rita didn't ask too many questions: Bobby's enemies were bad enough, but his friends frightened her more. One such friend arranged for Rita to waitress here. 'On a trial basis,' the manager kept reminding her, and every time she caught him looking at her waistline and undyed roots, she knew it wouldn't last. She stood out in this joint like a hooker at a wedding.

But what the hell. Right now, she was here, she was solvent and tomorrow's problems would take care of themselves.

And best of all, every so often, when Bobby was in a good mood he'd let 21

her toot some coke free of charge. She'd smuggle these gifts into work, and every time the customers got too much, she'd slip away to the john, take a little snort or maybe just rub some on her gums, then waltz back in with a brilliant smile which would damn those other bitch-waitresses to hell.

She needed a fix now, as she ran late with the order for table seven. She didn't expect much of a tip from this lot. They didn't want the buffet, just a gin and tonic each, except for the little man – what was that accent, Scottish?

He had kept her waiting for a whole minute, then slapped the menu shut and announced, with a grin which he no doubt thought charming, that he'd have water. Tap water, no ice, no lemon, no lime, no swizzle stick.

‘Will it bother you if it comes in a glass?’ Rita had asked, but he just shook his head and said, ‘No, fine, thank you,’ as if in his world, sarcasm did not exist. Most times, she would have sneered as she turned away, but found herself automatically smiling at one of the little man’s friends. He was blond and cute and packed his Levis. Twenty years ago, she’d have started chatting, given him free drinks and then jumped his bones down in the car park. Wishing herself younger, Rita moved back to the bar, catching sight of herself in the mirrored pillars. The sunset was harsh on her face, pinching her mouth and scoring her neck. She’d have to disappear to the john, real soon.

Roz looked at the sunset and thought of home. The Doctor had brought them to New York, telling Roz that it was time she saw the high-rise future she had only glimpsed in the Woodwicke of 1799. He claimed that it would remind both his companions of Spaceport Five. This single city was the blueprint for every future Earth metropolis to come, he said, and wondered aloud why architects yet to be born hadn’t chosen, say, Vienna instead. Roz could see more differences than similarities. The skyscrapers didn’t exactly live up to their name – indeed, they could be sued under the Trade Descriptions Act.

Her Spaceport flat had been on level 506, and that had been a lowly dwelling, literally. And here, the Undercity and Overcity were still meshed together, which didn’t make sense. Policing must be a nightmare.

The drinks arrived. The Doctor’s glass had a slice of lemon and a swizzle stick, and Roz suspected that the waitress had done this on purpose. But the Doctor said nothing and drank as if it were the finest water in history, which seemed to crush the waitress’s small victory. Then he sat back and fell into silence.

The sun’s fall dramatized the spires of Manhattan and steeped in red the adjoining conurbations, making them seen, like far-off countries. The Doctor sighed, then said, ‘Tomorrow, I’ll find you some great pasta.’

Chris snorted, suggesting ‘some hope’. When they had first arrived, the Doctor had told them he would lead them to the finest bagels ever made, and they had run up a bill of fifty-nine dollars in a taxi trying to find a back-22

street baker’s in Greenwich Village. Eventually, they had stopped in front of a nightclub, which the Doctor swore blind had been the place.

In 1912.

Nevertheless, they were enjoying themselves. The Doctor had reassured his companions that the causal loop, which seemed determined to drag the TARDIS into the arena of human psi-powers, had been broken. He speculated to Roz that these events had been instigated by his own curiosity, starting with Ricky McIlveen or the investigation of Yemaya 4 – or perhaps earlier, the Doctor had muttered, telling Roz about a fatal experiment on a Professor Clegg, long ago. The man's death had been partly the Doctor's fault, and perhaps the loop was a long-delayed consequence. But their confrontation with the Brotherhood had ended the circularity and set the Doctor's mind at rest. He claimed that in all probability, the Brotherhood still existed in some shape or form, but as an essentially benign organization, steering gifted humans towards the future.

Since then, they had been in New York for three days, and the Doctor had been wonderfully relaxed. He hinted that, round about now, a virus from the Heliotrope Galaxy was maturing in the city's sewer system, but that would be dealt with in sixteen years' time. All it needed was a good lawyer. Other than that, no danger had presented itself, and they toured the city in peace.

The Doctor took them to SoHo markets, a performance of Gorecki's *Sostenuto Tranquillo Ma Cantabile* in Central Park, and a late-night show-tune sing-song in Marie's Crisis Cafe. Just this morning, they had joined a good-natured demo protesting at the Supreme Court's verdict on the Michael Hardwick case. Roz had felt a little uneasy, thinking that she should be policing the parade rather than joining in, while Chris had got drunk on melon wine and had his ear pierced. The lobe had become a deep crimson, and he kept scratching it. Roz suspected that the needle had been dirty, but said nothing. The Roz of old would have chastised him, but then, the Roz of old had sometimes sounded like his mother. Now, she was just glad to see him having fun.

Tonight, the Doctor had promised them a stunning view, and glass-walled speed elevators shot them up to a circular lounge overlooking Manhattan.

When they sat down, Chris suggested moving to the other side so they could see sunset's effect upon the silver art-deco curves of the Chrysler Building, his favourite.

'Don't worry,' said the Doctor, 'it'll be round in a minute.' Roz smiled at Chris's puzzlement as he insisted and stood to retrieve his jacket.

Then she smirked, seeing Chris realize this was a revolving restaurant, turning at im-perceptible speed. Roz and the Doctor laughed as he slinked back to his seat to await the Chrysler Building's attendance, and then Chris suggested that they move anyway, because they were sitting too close to the buffet table. The Doctor said, 'Don't worry, it'll be gone in a minute.' Roz's laughter drew some 23

disdainful glances as Chris realized that the outer circle of the lounge – where the seats were – was on a revolve, while the centre – housing the lifts, the bar and the buffet – stayed still. The laughter continued, and Chris had to join in, as the buffet receded like a polite servant with duties elsewhere.

'Seriously,' said the Doctor, continuing the subject of pasta, 'there's a restaurant called the Odeon. It does fusilli with Swiss chard and sweet sausage like you can only dream of.' He paused, then corrected himself: 'The like of which you can only dream. I don't like to end a sentence on a preposition. Or a proposition, come to that.'

'Fine,' said Roz, 'we're in your hands,' and she was aware of the caution in her voice. As she tried to relax, a small doubt scratched at the back of her mind. She could not define it. Certainly, she was glad to see the Doctor at ease for once. Every so often he would clasp his hands behind his head and proclaim, 'Rest and relaxation,' rolling his r's, an indication that he actually meant it, that no hidden agenda lurked behind this visit. Now, the Doctor was making plans for tomorrow, plans so unlike his usual machinations, but the doubt persisted. This is a holiday, she thought, but the doubt smiled to itself and awaited its time.

Perhaps it was mere paranoia, that old friend. The fact that they had abandoned the TARDIS should have made Roz more content. Usually, it stood nearby, its civilized blue panelling a constant reminder of their visit's tran-sience. But now it sat beneath the central neon array of Times Square, indifferent to the clamour of the arrogant crowd. The Doctor had booked them into a hotel, which was surprisingly cheap considering that it was located fifty metres from the Algonquin Hotel, legends of which had endured even to Roz's time – not the Algonquin Club, but the Algonquin Massacre of 2199, when an android Dorothy Parker had bazooka'd her guests. The Doctor had made it clear to the Puerto Rican receptionist that their stay was open-ended. He had only looked awkward for a second as he asked whether Roz and Chris wanted single rooms, or one double, but Chris had laughed and said, 'Two singles.

Just like the TARDIS.'

Now, Roslyn Forrester admonished herself, and tried to copy the relaxed positions of her companions. Nothing was wrong, the Doctor had no secrets, tomorrow they would find great pasta, and if the air-conditioning had been working, this would be perfect. And then, at that precise moment, the waitress came back to replace the pretzel bowl and it all started again.

The Doctor went to say 'thank you', but the words dried on his lips and a shadow fell across his eyes as he looked at the woman – Roz noted her name-badge, 'Rita'. The waitress stared back at the Doctor, her pupils wide, and she looked scared. With a reflex action, she lifted her arm and wiped her nose.

The Doctor said nothing, and Rita wiped her nose a second time, pinching the 24

nostrils as though ashamed of something that might be seen there. Then the Doctor stood, a formal, stiff motion like a soldier called to duty. He turned away from the waitress and looked at his watch. As he did so, Roz's doubt resolved itself into sense: a holiday is only defined by its beginning and its end. And this was definitely an ending, as the Doctor lifted his head and stared into the middle distance, his back to the curved windows. Night was stealing upon Manhattan and the Doctor was backlit by the dying vestiges of the day. With his outline sketched in crimson, the centre of his frame was lost in darkness. Around him, the discreet lighting system compensated for the hour but seemed to forget the Doctor in its subtle illumination of the tables.

As a result, the Doctor's voice came from the shadow where his face should be.

'I'm very sorry, there's something I'd forgotten.

For a second, Rita thought that she'd left a trace of cocaine on her nose, despite the fact that every time she nipped to the john, she took a good look in the mirror afterwards to wipe away all tell-tale specks of white. The little man had stared at her with such certainty that, in a rapid succession of imagined images, Rita could see him calling the manager over, reporting her crime, the manager sacking her and Bobby beating hell out of her when she got home for being so goddamn stupid.

But none of that happened. Instead, the man stood, turned away,

looked at his watch and told his friends that he'd forgotten something. Rita's heart stopped hammering – and she wondered why, what talent did this man have to make her so afraid? She knew this job wouldn't last, and at least being sacked for snorting coke was a more stylish exit than getting kicked out for being fat and forty. Nevertheless, he had scared her, and she was glad as his companions complained, but picked up their belongings, about to leave. The woman slapped down a twenty-dollar bill in payment, and shot her a cat-like glance of venom, as if it were Rita's fault that this 'doctor' guy had left the oven on, or whatever.

Rita consoled herself by staying at the table to get a good look at the cute blond's ass as he walked towards the lift, but then the little man, still ignoring her, picked up his cream linen jacket and flicked it in the air, straightening it out before putting it on. Rita caught a wash of scent from the jacket's folds, and forgot the blond. She smelt dust, a dry, clean dust which made her think of deserts and oceans and things far away. For an impossible moment, she forgot that she didn't like this stranger, that he ordered pedantic drinks and terrified her with his dark, cold eyes, and instead she wanted to throw away her tray and her uniform and her crappy flat and her dangerous boyfriend.

She wanted to run after these three people and grab the little man by the arm 25

and turn him round to face her so she could look into his eyes again and say,

'Take me with you.'

But she stayed silent, unmoving. She watched them go, the two others asking why they had to leave, where they were going and what was so important that they couldn't finish their drinks. Their tone of voice indicated that they did not expect their questions to be answered.

The lift doors opened, then closed, and they were gone. Rita went back to work, and forgot them.

But she would never forget that smell. For the rest of her life, she would sometimes wake in the early hours of the morning, and catch a sleepy memory of that dust; she would think of places she could not reach, places she could not name, and she would lie awake, staring at the ceiling, the room, her small life, desolate without quite knowing why.

And she would remember the little man on the night of her death,

when she and Bobby injected themselves with a new batch of heroin and lay side by side on the mattress, ready for the rush, perhaps to have sex riding the crest of chemicals. The rush came, but both thought, it's different, it's wrong.

And as Rita opened her mouth, only to find that she could not speak, she remembered the little man's eyes, the stare so fixed, so grim, so certain that this moment would come.

As July the twenty-sixth drew closer to New York, an aerial view of the island of Manhattan would have revealed branches of neon and electric light asserting the city's contempt for sleep against the encroaching night, as three figures hurried towards Times Square and the blue box which would provide a more instantaneous transport to the next day. Thousands of miles to the east, on a slower curve of time, the Quadrant housing block carried its ordinary and extraordinary inhabitants towards dawn.

Even as the blue box faded from Times Square, only to resume corporeal existence seconds later a mile away from the Quadrant, in Angel Square, perhaps the most important player in events-to-come had yet to arrive in the arena. But her path was steadily, inevitably converging with the others', as her driver guided the car along the M6, the sun rising over the banks of parched grass to their right.

In the back seat, her husband had fallen asleep. In front, the driver said nothing and did not even glance in the mirror to see his passengers. He only consulted the map from time to time, wary of missing the turn-off for the hospital. In her seat next to her husband, Mrs Jericho sat upright to deny herself the upholstery's comfort, and stared straight ahead.

Without looking down, she smoothed her skirt, mindful of creases. She jutted her jaw forward – only a fraction, in case the movement appeared in-26

elegant – to allow her tongue to run along her top teeth, eradicating any potential stray lipstick. She lifted her right leg forward to run her foot along the bottom edge of the front passenger seat, to maintain her shoe's polish, then she did the same with her left leg. She flicked her head to ensure that her black hair bobbed symmetrically on both shoulders. Then she sat perfectly still, waiting to repeat the routine in a few minutes' time.

Attending to the minutiae of appearance kept Mrs Jericho busy, and

kept her thoughts from the vehicle following their car, the ambulance carrying her son. The new doctor had promised that he could restore the boy's health, but Mrs Jericho expected little improvement. She knew to her cost that doctors were not to be trusted.

At seven in the morning, in a midday heat, the car and the ambulance arced away from the motorway and headed for the city. Mrs Jericho and family had arrived.

27

Chapter 3

26 July 1987

Sunday was not a day of rest, at least not for the Capper's flat. All that day, men came and went.

Old Mrs Hearn sat on the walkway and watched the procession of criminals.

Years ago, she might have summoned up the energy to be disgusted, but now she felt only tired. She knew the men, the same men who used to visit the Capper on business. Some of them were no more than kids, belligerent little peacocks in bright white trainers and multicoloured Skater clothes. The others thought themselves more impressive, still in their twenties but dressed as though they worked in the City, all sharp suits and pointed black suede shoes.

Not that the different uniforms mattered, thought Mrs Hearn – young or old, smart or casual, they were all engaged in the same pursuit: drug dealing.

Her only consolation was that no women visited number 11. She hugged her knees in some small satisfaction with her own sex, and kept watching.

The pattern was different today. In the past, the men would strut in and out of the flat, but this time, the whole procedure seemed less confident. One or two approached the flat with a swagger, the trademark 'pimp-roll', but most looked scared. They would go inside, stay there for a while and then leave, terrified. Even those who pimp-rolled their way in came out and broke into a run as they cleared the forecourt. One teenage boy had barely stepped outside the door before clutching the wall and throwing up. Mrs Hearn presumed he had tried some new cocktail of drugs. Serves him right, she thought.

Even without these visitors of old, the Capper had managed to make himself newsworthy – on today of all days, thought Mrs Hearn, a day of worship.

The news on Radio Two gave discreet descriptions of his grave's defilement.

Apparently, the Capper's body had been dug up and stripped of skin, although they were awaiting positive identification of the body. The police suspected a gangland ritual, perhaps revenge, perhaps a demonstration by the yardies that they were now in charge.

As a result, it came as no surprise to Mrs Hearn that the Capper's flat was back in use. Since the death of the Capper, it was only a matter of time before someone took his place, and the desecration in the cemetery was probably an announcement that his successor had arrived. She had seen a man burn, and 29

it had made no difference.

The Capper is dead, long live the Capper.

'Nasty coffee,' said the Doctor.

Roz sipped, winced, nodded in agreement and spat the coffee into the gutter. Chris had already drained his cup and looked mildly surprised at the Doctor's comment.

They sat in uncomfortable wrought-iron chairs outside the Angel Square Cafe. The weather had misled the owner into an attempt at European sophistication, and tables and chairs had been placed outside under a green-and-white awning. The Doctor had spent a good three minutes clearing the pavement of Coke cans, burger cartons and broken glass before sitting. He had then studied the menu, muttering, 'Don't eat the beef.'

Now, as the waiter took away the coffee cups, Roz finally asked, 'What are we waiting for?'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor, and he smiled. The smile hollowed and darkened his eyes, and Roz wondered for the thousandth time how a smile could contain such sadness.

The smile also had another intent – to stop the conversation. Never mind the sunshine, thought Roz, this man could bask in his own enigma. So she ignored him and continued questioning, asking why

they had come here, until the Doctor had to reply.

‘I was reminded of something. In New York. Something I’ve put to one side for too many years. Now, I think, its time has come.’

‘And what’s “it”, exactly?’ asked Roz.

‘Cocaine.’

Roz knew that little trick, too. When the Doctor gave an answer in a single word, she shouldn’t ask any more; so she carried on.

‘What about cocaine?’

The Doctor smiled, properly this time, and pushed back the rim of his hat, leaning into the chair and relaxing. ‘Sometimes I think you’ve been travelling with me too long, Roslyn Forrester, you’ve learnt all my tricks. Benny would have left me alone by now.’ All three laughed.

‘So what was the reminder?’ asked Chris. ‘I didn’t see anything. One minute we’re watching the sunset, the next minute we’re off.’

‘The waitress,’ said the Doctor. ‘Rita. She’d taken cocaine, just before she came back to the table. It was on her upper lip.’

Hardly surprising, said Chris, ‘She could’ve done with a good shave.’

Roz silently admonished herself for missing the clue, but the Doctor said,

‘There was nothing to see, she was careful enough to wipe away the evidence.

But I could *smell* it.’

30

Chris asked about the power of a Time Lord’s nose, but the Doctor ignored him.

Roz considered the implications; the smallest of details had set the Doctor on a new path – though perhaps not new, perhaps many centuries in the making. Most people, she thought, scribble themselves a note or tie a knot in a hanky, but the Doctor’s reminders took more subtle forms. Four dimensional memos, scattered across time and space, *For the Doctor’s Eyes Only*: a person’s name, the curve of a tree, a change in the weather, a waitress’s lip. Tiny, vital signals, the

inevitable accretion of a life spent without a home, without a time.

And the longer it goes on, she realized, the more complicated it must get. Did the Doctor greet every new person, every new city, every new rainfall with the suspicion that it must bring word of his future? Such a man must live in fear of his own sight.

The Doctor continued, 'For the past two years, a special consignment of cocaine hydrochloride has been making its way to Britain. To this city.'

'All that from Rita's lip?' asked Chris, amused.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'Word has reached me. I have my contacts – friends and associates and one or two enemies. They keep their eyes open and their ears peeled, and leave the information for me to find. Scraps of paper, soft-ware, whispers.' He, paused, edging his chair back so that his head moved into the sunlight. His eyes became pits of shadow beneath the rim of his hat.

I remember once, Miss David had ideograms woven into a carpet.'

Despite the rising attire as the sun edged towards midday, Roz felt a distinct chill, wondering – and knowing – who these scattered friends and associates must be. If I ever leave the Doctor, she thought, he'll never leave me. For a fleeting moment, she had a vision of her old age, her body grown brittle and stooped beneath an alien sun; until the day of her death, this old woman would take care to carve words into the bark of a certain tree, in case her companion of long ago, the Time Lord, should chance upon it.

Four-dimensional memos require four-dimensional staff, she thought. The contract doesn't allow for holidays or danger money, it's a contract for life, written in blood.

'Anyway, I said the Doctor, breaking the silence and glancing at Roz as if he knew what she was thinking, 'this particular consignment hasn't had the easi-est of times, from what I'm told. Certainly, it left Colombia in 1985, and made its way to Norman's Cay. Ever heard of Norman's Cay?' He carried on, without waiting for an answer, 'A small island in the Bahamas, long since submerged by your time. It was bought lock, stock and barrel by Carlos Lehder Rivas in 1978. He established a miniature dictatorship, complete with its own army.

I've often thought, perhaps it's time I paid a visit. Miniature dictatorships are my speciality. Anyway, the cocaine stayed on

wanted, I suspect. Trapped by a price war as the cartels planned their assault on Europe. At the beginning of this year, the cocaine was flown to Barcelona, straight into the arms of El Pulpo, a drugs ring connecting Spain to the British Isles. At some point this summer – June, July, I'm not sure, the information gets a bit hazy at this point' – Roz had the impression that a friend or associate was about to be reprimanded or sacked – 'the consignment arrived at Heathrow. And from London, to here. Just as it wanted all along.'

'So it *isn't* cocaine,' said Chris, leaning across the table with arms folded, gripping each bicep with the opposite hand, as if giving himself a small hug, steeling himself for the fight to come. 'You're talking as if the cocaine's alive –'

'Like warlock,' interrupted Roz, also leaning forward, mirroring the tension and poise of Chris's stance.

'No, nothing like warlock,' said the Doctor. 'Warlock was a living entity, this is straight cocaine hydrochloride, derived from the leaves of *Erythraxylon Coca*. It used to be one of the ingredients of Coca-Cola, as a matter of – '

'Doctor.' Roz was glowering at him.

'The point is, the cocaine might be acting as a carrier.'

'For what?' asked Chris.

'I don't know. That's the problem, I've no idea.'

'Then how d'you know it's a carrier?' asked Roz.

The Doctor tilted his chair on to the back legs and lifted his head to the sun, so they could not see his expression. But his voice was dark and sombre, bringing a chime of midnight into the summer's day. 'Wherever this cocaine has travelled, it hasn't gone alone. Death has been its attendant. Death in a remarkably violent and inelegant form.' He paused, and then went on to describe the state of the corpses that littered the path from Colombia to the Bahamas, to Spain, to Britain: bodies with their heads split open like fer-mented fruit. 'And now it's reached its target. This place. These people.'

Then the Doctor slammed his chair back to its upright position and sat forward, grinning. 'I don't know about you, but I could do with lunch.'

Bev Tyler thought Sundays were dead boring. Boring and dead. For weeks, the school holidays had been approaching like a wild and fabulous hurricane, spinning with promises of excitement and freedom and unlimited television.

And for one whole day, when the hurricane had finally hit, she'd thrown herself into it, whirling off to Maxine's house and getting pissed on Bailey's Irish Cream. But as soon as the hangover had passed, she remembered what she managed to forget, each and every summer: holidays were boring and empty and endless, and the television was crap.

And Sundays were the worst of all, a cunning day which retained all the dread of term-time. As evening approached and religion lurked in the net-32

work schedules – *Sing Out* and *Home on Sunday* – Bev still felt haunted by undone homework, despite knowing that she had nothing to get up for the next morning except *Stingray*. Sunday evenings were spent in the company of ghost teachers and ghost detention, the ghosts secure in the knowledge that they would return, reincarnate, come September. Mum said that Sundays never got better, even when you grew up. School conspired to scar Sunday for the rest of your life.

It wasn't as if you could even go to town and hang around the shopping centre, Bev thought, as she headed into town nevertheless. On Saturdays, you could run through the arcades in a hostile, giggling gang, hunting down boys from the year above, wolf-whistling at complete strangers. You could shoplift, and last week, Maxine had introduced Bev to the art of begging, going up to old women with your cheeks sucked in and eyes wide, pathetic, and asking for twenty pence. 'It's for me mam.' By Saturday evening, they'd made three pounds fifteen between them and spent it on magazines and crisps, devouring both in front of *Seaside Special*.

But Sunday, the corridors of shops were closed and gated, the exile from Eden. Bev couldn't stay at home. Her brother Carl had been in the doghouse for almost a fortnight, filling the flat with gloom. It wasn't Bev's fault he had been so stupid, but she still had to suffer the mood, and her mother's Temper.

To make things worse, Maxine had gone to Rhyl with her parents. In her absence, Bev had agreed to meet Anne-Marie, Jan and Jan's stupid boyfriend, Frank – Bev hated Frank, he had bad teeth and stared at her breasts all the time. They had made plans to go to the multiplex,

which Bev could not afford.

But she was meeting them anyway, hoping that the moment she announced this, Anne-Marie, Jan and Frank's plans would be spoilt. 'Oh no, we can't go without you, we couldn't, that's not fair,' Jan would say, martyring herself in that little-girly voice. If Bev's Sunday was crap, then she'd make it crap for Anne-Marie and Jan and Frank as well. This alone made her smile as she walked across Angel Square.

Then she glanced across at the cafe and Sunday changed. Sunday was suddenly a cold and ancient thing, powerful with two thousand years of religious terror, as it brought a fear far greater than homework into her life.

She saw the man.

He was sitting between a tall blond bloke and a middleaged black woman.

He looked no older. He was even wearing the same clothes, without the covering of mud. It was the man who had stared at Bev, long ago, on the night of Christmas Eve, 1977; the storybook man, the man who brought dragons and witches and danger in his wake.

* * *

33

'We're being followed,' said the Doctor.

'But we're not moving,' Chris pointed out, looking round, until Roz slapped his leg to stop his surveillance being so obvious.

'True,' said the Doctor, 'but the principle's the same. That teenage girl. She's walked past us three times, now.'

'Who is she?' asked Roz.

'I've no idea,' the Doctor replied. 'I've never seen her before.'

Roz and Chris saw the girl standing next to the square's memorial statue –

and behind her, the placid blue shell of the TARDIS. She was clad in tight, stonewashed denim and her face was hidden beneath ropes of greasy brown hair, a downcast look she affected to disguise the fact that she was staring at the cafe.

The Doctor entered into what Roz could only describe as a dance. It reminded her of the courtly steps strange insects might take before mating. The Doctor smiled at the girl. She scowled and walked away, then returned five minutes later, feigning a transparent air of nonchalance. Reluctantly she came closer, pretending to read the cafes menu, and this time the Doctor studiously ignored her. Then the waiter stepped into the pattern, putting a milkshake on to the empty table next to the Doctor, and the Doctor spoke to the girl without looking at her: 'That's for you.'

'Piss off,' she said and pretended to find something fascinating in the shop window next door, while Roz and Chris wondered how the Doctor had ordered the milkshake without them noticing. At length, the girl circled closer to the table, then sat in front of the milkshake. She did so with a heavy sigh, as if she had nothing better to do, and chose a chair as far away from the Doctor as possible. Now Roz was reminded of more specific insects, spiders and flies.

Eventually the girl sipped her drink, sullen, the milkshake becoming some sort of punishment. Finally, deciding that the dance was done, the Doctor scraped his chair round so that he faced the girl and said, 'If you don't like strawberry, they've got three other flavours.'

Bev looked at the man, a glimmer of aggression beneath the shop-lifted blue eyeliner. 'What are you, some sort of perv?'

The man blinked as though he had never heard the word perv before, then said, 'At a guess, I'd say you were fourteen.'

'How d'you know?' she spat back.

'I counted the rings in your leg.'

Bev looked down at her legs, then made sense of what the man had said and looked up to find all three strangers smiling, the blond one suppressing a laugh. 'You think you're so funny,' said Bev, and she stood, about to leave, but then she decided to fire the parting shot with her own small knowledge.

34

'You're from Red Hamlets, aren't you?' Defiantly, she put her hands on her hips and stared at him.

'No, I'm not,' said the man.

‘Well, of course you’re not now, they’re pulling it down, but you were. I seen you.’

‘And when exactly did you seen me?’

‘You remember.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t. Honest injun.’

The phrase puzzled Bev and she grew a little more confident, thinking that this man might be retarded. She stepped forward with the vicious smile she saved for after-school fights. ‘You did, ’cos you seen me, and I seen you.’

‘So tell me. I’m not in the habit of asking questions twice.’ Bev saw his expression harden, his eyes glinting like chips of ice. ‘When did we see each other?’

Under his stare, Bev felt very young, four years old again. When she spoke, she was surprised by her small, feeble voice. ‘Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve, 1977.’

‘And that was the only time we saw each other?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then tell me this,’ said the man, and he stood also. He was barely two inches taller than Bev, and yet he seemed to dwarf her. The sun’s steep light pooled handsome black shadows beneath his features, a mask of authority.

‘Tell me what is so very important about that night.’

Bev shifted from foot to foot. ‘I never said it was important.’

‘Ahh, but you did. We saw each other ten years ago, just once. And you’d have been, what, four or five years old? And yet your memory of the event is strong enough to make you sit with complete strangers, in a day and age when that’s hardly a wise thing for a teenage girl to do.’ He moved in closer, almost gleeful, almost savage. ‘1977, you were four or five years old and yet you can pinpoint my face, the exact date, the exact year with the precision of a laser. That night could only have been important. So I want you to tell me what happened.’

Bev was scared, though she did not know why, and she could hear her

own panic. ‘Nothing happened, you should know, you were there.’

‘I might well have been there, but I haven’t been there yet.’

Bev astonished herself; she cried. For the first time since she was eleven and Darren Beardsmore told everyone in drama club she was pregnant, she cried in public. Her view of the little man distorted and blurred, and for a second she thought he had drugged the milkshake, before realizing that her own tears were to blame. She slapped both hands across her face – I should 35

run, she thought, this man’s nothing, I should run away – and she hissed to herself, ‘Oh, I’m *shamed*.’

‘Leave her alone, Doctor,’ she heard the blond man say. Bev felt her cheeks burn, blushing. I haven’t blushed since I was a kid, she thought, oh God I’m more shamed than I’ve ever been shamed in me life. The little man leant in close, and she knew with horror that he would be looking all kind and sympathetic, like she’d wet herself in class or something, so she kept her hands over her face. She felt the slick of eyeliner smudge under her fingers, and that confirmed it. Right, she thought, I can never take me hands away from me face ever again in me whole life

– *And why am I crying?*

She honestly had no idea.

Time passed. The man introduced himself as the Doctor, and his friends Roz and Chris, and for all Bev’s reluctance, he managed to coax out her name. The Doctor gave Bev a handkerchief. She wiped away her tears, then decided to wipe off all her eyeliner, and then pocketed the hanky when she thought the Doctor wasn’t looking. Roz ordered more tea and a second milkshake. The Chris bloke tried to change the subject and cheer Bev up. He complained that he’d had his ear pierced the day before and it was infected. To prove the point, he squeezed the lobe and to his obvious surprise, a gobbet of pus flew out. Roz said it was disgusting, but it made Bev laugh a lot. As Chris rubbed his ear, Bev saw how good-looking he was, though more like a man off a poster, just the sort of man she didn’t like. Bev was fourteen and sophisticated; she knew that character was far more important.

Within ten minutes, Bev was sitting with these strangers, drinking a third milkshake and chatting as if she had known them for years – which is just the way perverts work, muttered a dark voice at the back of her mind.

Just when she thought and hoped it had been forgotten, the Doctor smiled at Bev and said, ‘I’m really very sorry if I made you cry. I didn’t mean to.’

‘I didn’t cry,’ said Bev, ‘I get hayfever sometimes.’

‘Hayfever and bad memories can have the same effect,’ the Doctor replied.

‘Bad memories can creep up on you when you least expect, even on glorious summer days. I’ve got so many bad memories that if I started to cry, I might never stop. I could flood the world, and far beyond.’

There was an awkward silence. Bev saw Chris give Roz a worried look, and a new thought occurred to her. She had presumed these three were friends, but now she realized that the other two knew the Doctor no better than she did. Briefly, she wondered what equivalent of milkshakes had drawn them into his company.

Then, to prove her point, Bev described the memory in question, the winter’s night of ten years past. ‘I don’t remember it ’cos it was bad or anything.

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It just happened, that’s all. Mum was talking to this tall man late at night –

an’ I don’t need telling what was going on, it was always the same old thing.

She owed him money, she owed lots back then, Dad had buggered off a few months before. An’ she followed him out an’ I followed her. They talked for a bit in the street outside, that’s when I saw you. An’ you were looking at me, so don’t deny it. Then this tall bloke drove off, an’ I ran back home. That’s it.

End of story, all right?’

The Doctor leaned right in close – she thought he was going to get a blob of milkshake on his nose from the tall sundae glass – and he looked right into Bev’s eyes, as though she were the centre of his world. His voice was rich and deep and honeyed; it almost contained its own echo, the voice of a man standing at the heart of an empty cathedral: ‘Are you sure, Bev? Is there something you’ve forgotten, some detail? You can remember it now.

Remember it, Bev, remember why it makes you cry. Say it out loud, for the first time in your life, and it will haunt you no more.'

As she stared into the abyss of his eyes, Bev held her breath. And she remembered – no, this wasn't memory, this was something more intense, more alive, she was little and scared and her feet were freezing, and she could see *Her mother, on the walkway –*

Her mother looks round, wild and scared –

Her mother and the Tall Man in the street –

The Tall Man turns away, he's leaving, and he's –

Bev shut her eyes, so tight that it almost hurt. When she opened them again, she faced the Doctor with her best, stroppy expression, against which no man stood a chance.

'No,' she said. 'There's nothing more. So leave it. Right?'

The Doctor stood, stretched his arms, and said, 'Well. If these Red Hamlets are so important to the tale, let's have a look at them.'

The unlikely quartet walked across town, from the comparative wealth of the city centre to the poorer districts of the south-west, and the sun showed them no mercy. Only the Doctor remained oblivious to the heat, striding along in his jacket and jumper as though sweat were an impossible thing.

Around them, shops and houses became more shabby, some boarded up, some graffiti'd. Tired women sat on doorsteps, picking their teeth, and skin-head children with dirty faces swore and ran. On a piece of wasteland, an old Cortina burned while the laughter of men carried across from the nearby red-brick pub. Once, the wail of sirens could be heard, far off, like an animal lost at night, but then faded into the silence of Sunday afternoon.

The three time travellers and the teenage girl walked the dusty, uneven pavements, while all around them messages flickered along telephone wires, 37

an invisible pattern of panic spreading the terrifying news: *The Capper's alive, he's dead but he's alive and back in business. And he's* white . *The Capper's come back and he's white.*

The Doctor, Roslyn Forrester, Chris Cwej and Bev Tyler walked on,

into the heart of the web.

As Bev had promised, Red Hamlets had all but gone. The area was fenced off by steel wire, behind which two inactive yellow JCBs soaked in the sun's heat.

Around them, the skeleton of the housing block lay open, gutted rooms with the fourth wall removed like a theatre set staging some modem epic of urban decay.

Bev led the Doctor, Chris and Roz into the Quadrant. The sunlight made the three-storey housing block appear more dilapidated than usual, exaggerating the peeling paint and uneven brickwork. As a rule, Bev would be first to criticize the place, but in front of strangers – strangers with money, those milkshakes cost 80p each – she would not be embarrassed. She led them towards the centre as if it were a palace.

Entering the courtyard, all four stepped closer to the wall to let a man run past. He was young, short, dressed in a cheap black suit, and his face was pale and sweating. He could not leave the Quadrant fast enough. Bev looked in the direction from which he had come. 'That didn't take long,'

she muttered cynically, and she pointed out the wood-covered windows of the Capper's residence. 'Drugs den,' said Bev, proud to show off her local knowledge. She felt much more confident, practically in charge, now they were on her territory. 'They've been buying and selling from there for years.

Whizz, Charlie, anything, you name it. Bloke who lived there copped it a while back, but it looks like someone else has set up shop. What?'

She asked the question sharply, seeing a look pass between her three companions, as though something had just been confirmed. But before the Doctor could reply, a voice bellowed across the Quadrant.

'Beverley!'

Her mother was leaning over the first-floor parapet. Then, without waiting for a reply, Mum ran along the walkway and disappeared from sight, heading down the stairwell. Bev rolled her eyes to heaven. 'Now I'm in trouble. Stand back. Mum's in a Temper.'

Mrs Tyler emerged from the stairwell and ran towards her daughter. Already she looked out of breath, a woman not used to running, but

she fixed the Doctor, Chris and Roz with a stare which would admit no weakness. Roz pictured Mrs Tyler in 1977, crossing the same courtyard on Christmas Eve, branding her daughter's mind with the memory.

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Mrs Tyler was a small woman, spreading into middle age with a swelling of fat across her stomach, though her hands and neck remained wiry. There was an air of neglect about her – hair badly bleached and wild, her skin poor, still spotty in her forties. She looked as though years had passed since she had spent any money on herself. She wore a faded nylon apron over navy slacks and a man's shirt, and slippers. As she approached, they could see the eyes beneath the blazing stare, yellowed and bleary from too much drink.

'What is it?' demanded Mrs Tyler. 'What's she done now?' For all her anger, she placed a protective arm around Bev's shoulder,

'Mu-um,' whined Bev, shrugging her off. Roz noticed that Bev became younger in her mother's presence. 'I haven't done nothing, so don't start.'

An old woman appeared on the second-floor parapet and called out, 'Anything wrong?'

'No thank you, Mrs Hearn,' said Mrs Tyler, her voice cold. Roz guessed that Mrs Tyler did not like the old woman, but Mrs Hearn kept watching, her spectacles glinting in the sun, Then Bev's mother made her daughter face her.

'Who are these people? What have you been up to, you said you were meeting Anne-Marie. Come on, what have you done?' She darted a suspicious glance at the newcomers, a look Roz and Chris had seen all too many times before, a look that said: *police*.

Bev rolled her eyes to heaven again, a Pavlovian response to her mother's questions, and she looked ready to launch into an argument when the Doctor stepped forward, doffed his hat and said, 'Mrs Tyler, your daughter's been of immense help, she's been showing us around and we've wasted more than enough of her time. If I might introduce myself. I'm the Doctor –'

And for once, even the Doctor looked surprised as the words had a significant effect upon Bev's mother. She visibly relaxed, pushing back her hair, though her voice remained cautious. 'Well, why didn't you

say? For God's sake, letting me go on. We've been expecting you, you were supposed to come two days back.'

'I was?' said the Doctor, lost.

Mrs Tyler turned to Roz and Chris. 'You must be Miss Forrester. And Mr –

I'm sorry, I forget, Wedge or something.'

'Cwej,' said Chris, blinking, and looking at Roz.

'Cwej, that's right. So what took you so long? We've been waiting.'

Chapter 4

Roz lit another cigarette and looked at the flat – their flat, number 43, two doors along from the Tylers' on the first floor. It comprised of a narrow hall, barely two metres long, with the kitchen and first bedroom leading off to the left and right respectively. Then came the living room, with a window overlooking the back of the Quadrant, a charmless view of the Red Hamlets' wreckage. The room was furnished with a table, two cheap self-assembly chairs and a phone. The brown carpet was as thick and inflexible as cardboard. To the left were two doors leading to the two tiny bedrooms. To the right, a door led to the alcove that masqueraded as a bathroom. Chris had gone to inspect his infected ear in the bathroom mirror, and his massive frame had managed to collide with every available surface, as though he were fighting with ten men over who should use the bath first.

Home, thought Roz. Compared to her family's kraal on Io's Kibero Patera, this was a hovel, but compared to the dwellings of Spaceport Five, not too bad at all, despite the smell of old vegetables.

Mrs Tyler had led them up the stairwell after retrieving the keys from Mr Djanogly in flat 1, explaining that the man from the council had hung around for hours on Friday, waiting to grant the new tenants access. He had given up when the pubs opened, and left the keys and papers with Mr Djanogly, who was paid a small council retainer to act as semi-official caretaker.

'We knew you were coming,' said Mrs Tyler, puffing with exertion from the stairs as she showed them in. 'Mr Skinner – he lives three doors down, number 46, don't cross him, he's got hell of a temper –

he's got a niece in the Housing Department, she saw your names on the waiting list. It's quite posh for the Quadrant, having a doctor.' She looked at the Doctor with nervous suspicion, assuming he had been struck off many years ago. 'I'd take care with a title like that, you'll get kids knocking on your door for Temazepam prescriptions, tell

'em to sod off. Now, I'm sure you won't make too much noise. I've got a boy of nine, he's in bed early. And my name's Winnie. Nice to meet you.' Winnie was polite, but the look on her face as she left suggested that she would remain wary of newcomers.

Now, the deep blue of evening was bleeding into the sky and the few functional security lights blinked into life on the walkways. The Doctor stood in the kitchen, surveying the Quadrant, Roz and Chris at his side. They had an 41

excellent view of the Capper's flat.

'Just as you intended all along,' said Roz, but the Doctor did not reply. He continued to stare out of the window, his expression unreadable. They had discussed the convenience of their introduction into Quadrant society as soon as Winnie Tyler had left. Evidently, at some point in the past, the Doctor would enter their names on the housing list, knowing that a flat situated opposite the Quadrant's notorious drug-den would become available at this date, and a yet-to-be-arranged assignation with the four-year-old Bev Tyler would lead them there. The previous occupants of number 43, the Constantinos, had moved to a semidetached house in the suburbs a fortnight ago, after a modest win on the Pools. Roz suspected the Doctor's hand in this also. She had long since stopped believing in coincidence, seeing only four-dimensional memos instead. No doubt Mr Constantino had been busy filling in his coupon when a little man in a battered hat had sidled up and whispered some different numbers.

When the Doctor finally spoke, he said, 'It's too easy.' He left another silence, then continued, 'You've both seen enough of my machinations in the time we've spent together.

They're rarely so visible. There's something rushed about this, something clumsy. Something urgent.'

'Maybe it's just simple, for once,' suggested Chris with a hopeful smile. 'We could lay our hands on this cocaine tonight, I bet. Maybe everything will be sorted by Monday, and we'll be gone.'

'Perhaps,' said the Doctor, with little conviction. He turned his back to

Roz and Chris so they could only see his face reflected in the window; an insubstantial Doctor, overlaid with the lines and squares of the Quadrant outside.

'But I know my own techniques. This suggests I'm in a hurry. And hurry's a rare thing for a man with all of time and space at his disposal. Things may be more complicated than I first thought.'

'In what way?' asked Roz.

'If I knew that, then they wouldn't be complicated,' and she was surprised by the quiet anger in his voice. Then he turned back to them with a weak, insincere smile. 'All these years' experience, and I still feel like I'm starting from scratch, every time.' He waved away Roz's cigarette smoke. 'I wish you wouldn't do that.'

Roz raised one eyebrow in defiance, and pointed out that the Doctor knew full well that her thirtieth-century metabolism would not allow the cigarette to cause any harm. Manufactured metagenics in her bloodstream would break down the tar and nicotine, and expel them in her bodily wastes.

'That's all very well,' said the Doctor, 'but it still smells awful.'

* * *

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Chris boiled water in a saucepan, to make tea; the Constantinos had left some basic supplies behind, cavalier in their new-found wealth. He rather liked the notion of living here for a while. The Quadrant was shabby, but somehow comforting. At least it would be free of madmen and robots and the standard paraphernalia of his life – a certain lethal cocaine notwithstanding – and the wonderful summer looked set to continue.

Chris had caught the sharp, cold look which had passed between Winnie Tyler and her upstairs neighbour, Mrs Hearn, and it promised a new kind of interest. As a child, Chris had scorned his mother's love of holo-soaps, preferring to watch sport instead. But the Quadrant – enclosed, and probably unchanged over twenty years – was a pure holo-soap setting. The Tyler-Hearn exchange had resembled those protracted silences at the end of a scene when some poor, stranded actress would be trapped, starved of dialogue, sustaining a single, exaggerated emotion at the director's insistence. This could be fun, thought Chris.

He enjoyed the passing of ordinary, unstressful moments with Roz and the Doctor, particularly now that he and Roz were closer than before. In the past, Chris had always felt a little envious of Roz's relationship with the Time Lord. It wasn't exactly close, and certainly not intimate, but there was a powerful honesty when the two spoke. Often, Chris had felt excluded. Many times he would wander into the depths of the TARDIS, only to chance upon his two fellow travellers in earnest conversation. The discussion might not involve anything important – it could be something as mundane as the energy-efficiency of the roundels on the wall but Chris had always had the impression that the Doctor told Roz *everything*, more than he ever told Chris or even Benny. Chris understood why the Doctor placed such trust in her; there was a hard, logical core at the heart of Roz's reasoning, which would allow the Doctor to talk without giving too much of himself away. Roz was steeped in the importance of hierarchy, and consciously or not, she accepted the Doctor as leader, automatically subordinating herself.

In those days, Chris knew that the Doctor and Roz mostly regarded him as –

now, what was the phrase? Something Chris had found in a twentieth-century paperback in the TARDIS library, a book which might have been fiction or fact.

That was it – *Mostly Harmless*. His companions had thought of him as Mostly Harmless, which may well be damning with faint praise, but Chris had felt no resentment. Indeed, it had been rather convenient at times.

Now, Chris was no longer the outsider, as his friendship with Roz had deep-ened and become more complicated. Picking up the boiling pan, Chris wondered whether the Doctor now felt excluded instead.

Chris carried the tea through. Putting the mugs down, he gave his ear a good scratch; the skin was hot and tender. Then he joined the Doctor at the 43

window, saying, 'If we're staying, we'd better get to know the neighbours.

Could be useful. This place must house, I don't know – a hundred?'

'One hundred and fifty-seven,' said the Doctor. He walked to the far wall and switched off the kitchen light. Their reflections in the window disappeared and night claimed the room. The Doctor moved

forward, to lean over the sink and study his environment. Outside, the Quadrant was empty, without the slightest breeze to stir the litter on the floor. It seemed suspended in time, held that way in the Doctor's stare. 'Everybody needs good neighbours,'

he mused, then he spoke more softly as though not wanting to disturb the night. 'I may not be at my best in a place like this. People retreat into their homes, making them fortresses, with little or no notion of the wider picture.

Their concerns are focused inwards. At the end of the day, they want to know what they're having for tea, and what's on television. That's how they survive.

And it makes it very difficult for me to gain access.'

'Access to what?' asked Chris, his voice a whisper.

'To them. To their lives. To the pulse of things. I've spent too much of my time in the company of kings and courtiers. Wherever I've gone in the universe, I tend to find the seats of power. The rulers and the rebels, the soldiers and the victims, the fools and their audience. If I have a talent, it's for getting to the centre of things, but this place has no centre. And that worries me. I might not see all the things I need to see. The Tyler family – they might be important, I suspect they are. But I'd find it easier to gain access to the court of Rassilon himself, than to step over Winnie Tyler's front door.

And there are seventy-six front doors in the Quadrant, seventy-six fortresses I might need to breach. That's quite a task. And if things are as complicated as I think, I can't afford to fail.'

Across the Quadrant, in flat 28, Harry Harvey dwelt in delirium. July the twenty-sixth had been marginally kinder to Harry than July the twenty-fifth, though he was in no fit state to appreciate this. At six in the morning, some primal force, a will to survive, had pulled him from unconsciousness with the terrifying thought: *you're not safe yet.*

He shocked himself awake, and found that he was stuck to the bedsheets, his own dried blood the adhesive. He peeled off the sheets, fearful that every slight crack of the material would wake up David. He was hot, boiling hot, and the indomitable rational part of his mind told him that he was in a fever.

But that didn't matter: he had things to do. He folded the stiff sheets as best he could, then put them and the black bin liner containing his

bloodsoaked clothes at the back of the wardrobe, all the while thinking of the bathroom.

He had washed it clean last night but now he knew that he couldn't have washed it *properly* clean.

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The blood's still there, he thought, the blood's still there and David might see it (and why is there blood? sang a deeper, insane part of his mind, what happened last night, remember it, Harry, what happened in the graveyard?).

Then, wrapping a dressing-gown around himself, Harry inched open the door and almost gave up. David Daniels was asleep on the settee, a sprawl of limbs; he had abandoned his single sheet in the night and lay in his boxer shorts, one arm draped elegantly across his bare chest (just what you like, Harry, sang the nightmare jester's voice, your favourite thing right here in your front room, go on, *take it*). Harry was close to tears. David represented an impossible obstacle, barring his way to the bathroom.

A second voice took up the argument, a stronger voice: the ghost-Sylvie, Harry's two-years-dead wife, still at his side. Harry did not find her presence remarkable, only the fact that she was helping him, still on his side after the disgusting things she had learnt. 'You soft thing,' she said in silent words, 'the poor lad's been drinking, he won't hear you. Come on now, sweetheart. Walk with me.' And Sylvie led him on, a faint chuckle in her voice, to cross the living room and enter the bathroom. David stayed in his happier delirium, snoring.

Of course, there were streaks of blood across the bath, though nothing was visible on the floor; the lino was jet black and shot with burgundy, so no stains would show. 'I knew,' whispered Sylvie, 'I bought that lino fourteen years back because I knew this day would come, now aren't I kind to you? Aren't I?' Harry nodded his head in dumb agreement as he wiped the bath clean, keeping the water at a trickle so that David would not hear. He thanked whatever gods might exist that David was severely short-sighted but too vain to wear glasses, so he had missed the terrible evidence last night.

Beneath Sylvie's voice, the jester sang a different song, a song of mirrors and scars. Harry kept working, knowing that he would eventually have to turn around and look in the bathroom mirror, to see his body's mutilation.

But when the moment could be put off no longer, Harry stared in the mirror with very little reaction. After a moment, he cocked his head to one side, rather curious. His handiwork was actually rather good. The stitches were uneven, but they held. A wide, red oval of bruised tissue surrounded the wound, yellowing at the scar's lip. It hurt, but that was just how it should be. With a strange sense of pride, Harry tip-toed back to his bedroom and fell unconscious once more.

He stayed there for the rest of the day. David arose at one o'clock, but did not disturb him. The unspoken ground rules of their cohabitation demanded that they left each other alone as much as possible. Harry surfaced briefly at half-past one when he heard David talking to himself in the front room, but sleep soon reclaimed him.

* * *

45

David Daniels had, in fact, looked out of the window when he heard Winnie Tyler shout her daughter's name. David sprang to attention, despite his hangover. A good row in the Quadrant was a spectacle not to be missed, and he put on his glasses to watch. He was initially disappointed to see Winnie Tyler and Bev talking to three strangers, but then David said aloud – this was the exclamation which woke Harry – 'Oh my good God, look at the arse on that.'

The man was impossibly tall, blond and smiling, his torso sculpted in white cotton. David watched as the man was led on to the first-floor walkway, and as he strode out of the stairwell David got to see the front of his Levis – always more important than the rear. 'I'm in love,' breathed David, then he ran to the bathroom to exfoliate.

Harry's instinct for preservation woke him again at seven in the evening, knowing that David would have gone to his sister's for Sunday tea. Once more, he sprang awake, sweating, knowing what he had to do: dispose of the evidence.

He dressed carefully (did you think this wound wasn't hurting? sang the jester, a cruel refrain. Feel it now, Harry, feel it burn with every beat of your heart). Sweat poured off his forehead and stung his eyes as he rooted out the sheets and bin liner from the wardrobe and shoved them into a holdall.

Then Harry began the long, awful journey to the bins at the back of the Quadrant, and the greatest effort of all was composing his face to look normal, so that no one would stop him. The ghost-Sylvie

accompanied his steps. By staring straight ahead, Harry could just see her at his side, a glimpse of jade-green and diamond. I love you, he thought, did I ever tell you that I love you, Sylvie? Perhaps it was Sylvie who warded off any strangers with charms she had learnt in the hereafter, for no one disturbed Harry as he walked to the bins, threw the holdall away, and began the impossible journey back.

As Harry reached the stairwell, and a tear of pain fell down his cheek, even the supernatural skills of the long dead Sylvie could not ward off the approach of that strange little boy from flat 41. To Harry's despair, nine-year-old Gabriel Tyler came trotting towards him, smiling his sly little smile.

Gabriel had an urgent mission of his own. He had kept the soft-porn magazine which his mother had forbidden him to read. He had hidden it beneath his bed, under his hundreds of drawings – the new drawings, the ones which had come to him on Saturday: a Witch's face, contained within the one constant of his scribbles, the noughts-and-crosses grid. Having looked and grimaced at the photos in Knave, Gabriel had to get rid of it, knowing that his mother cleaned every room thoroughly on Monday mornings. Mum, of course, wouldn't have let Gabriel out on his own as evening fell, but Gabriel 46

had grinned at her, looked her right in the eye and told her that it wouldn't take a minute, he had to pop into Sam's flat because he owed him twenty pence, and he'd be back before she knew it. His mother had let him go. She always did, when he asked in his special way.

The little boy met the old man halfway up the stairs, both keeping their secrets close.

'Mr Harvey,' said Gabriel. They stood in silence, Gabriel's eyes wide and glittering as he stared deep into the old man's private hell. For a second, Gabriel giggled, seeing something rude. Then the giggle was gone, his face solemn, contemplating questions he dared not ask. Finally, Gabriel stepped forward, lifted himself on to tip-toe to get close to Mr Harvey's pale, wet face, close enough to kiss him; but instead, Gabriel put his finger to his lips, and whispered one word.

' *Hush.* '

The word seemed to jerk Mr Harvey into clumsy action. He pushed his way past and stumbled up the remaining steps, not looking back. Gabriel clutched the paper bag containing pictures of naked women to his chest and watched Mr Harvey go. He looked at him with new eyes.

He had never paid old Harry much attention before, but now the glint in Gabriel's eye was almost one of admiration. And if knowledge is power, then Gabriel felt that bit more powerful as he skipped the rest of the way to the bins.

Harry made it home and collapsed on his bed, praying for oblivion's return.

While he had seen many remarkable things in the past twenty-four hours, only the burning eyes of Gabriel Tyler now persisted in his waking nightmare.

Harry was afraid that anyone and everyone might know his secret his many secrets – and of course, this paranoia was an inevitable consequence of his fever. Except where Gabriel Tyler was concerned.

He knows, thought Harry. Jesus, just one look at me and he knows.

Harry next awoke at ten minutes to midnight, when screams and sirens announced the firebombing of the Capper's flat.

At twelve minutes to midnight, two minutes before the attack, the Doctor stood in the darkened kitchen of number 43, keeping watch on the Capper's flat. He, Roz and Chris had agreed on constant surveillance throughout the night and the Doctor had taken first watch, giving Roz and Chris the impression that he wanted to be alone for a while.

The watchmen were also being watched. Many of the Quadrant's inhabitants suspected that the authorities, in some shape or form – either the police or, more likely, DHSS snoopers – had taken occupancy of the Constantinos' old flat. The new trio had spent most of the afternoon staring out of the kitchen 47

window, which many thought proved the suspicion, while others argued that the DHSS would hardly be so obvious, or inclined to spend money on rent, and they certainly wouldn't work on a Sunday.

No such worries disturbed the mental processes of the new Capper. Standing at the front window, the creature had extended its tongue, the flesh splitting open, allowing two metal wedges to flick forward, a primitive scissors which opened a small slit between the sheets of hardboard covering the windows of number 11. The scissors had then retreated back into the tongue, and internal picoscopic devices knitted the flesh back together, leaving behind a neat black scar which ran to the back of the Capper's throat. Now, the creature studied the Doctor.

A shaft of illumination from the security lights fell across its lumpy alabaster skin. A small fold of dying flesh had peeled away from its right ear; a long metal tendril emerged from the right eye's tear duct, waved in the air as if new-born and blind, then found the flap and pushed it back into place. The end of the tendril shone white, burning the skin into position, then the eye-finger withdrew, leaving a tear of blood. The Capper considered the distant little man, magnified the image, analysed it and nodded.

Buried circuits acknowledged that the correct analysis of the little man's physiognomy should produce something entitled 'relief' in its emotional lattice, but there was only a gaping hole where that lattice should be. The creature's nod was a signal that, lacking the full complement of functions, the information had been bypassed to the remains of the original Capper's brain, the emotional response replicated there.

The procedure took a nanosecond, and the creature noted this as confirma-tion that it was operating below par. The creature considered the problem, deciding that it was not enough of a problem to stop the completion of its task. From the moment of its Arrival in Colombia four years ago, it had been aware of limitations within its operational parameters. During the Sleeping, things had changed, and the creature did not know why. It knew only that its intelligence had been downloaded, taken back to the Homeworld and nothing put in its place. At the centre of its being, there existed a void, ragged and raw at the edges, metal synapses crying out the loss. Using the Capper's wetware to approximate the feelings, the creature felt robbed, it even felt pain, and above all it felt determination, a resolve to complete its purpose. It fell back on default systems, and it knew that, given the level of technology on this planet, default systems were more than enough.

The War would continue, the War would be won.

This thought penetrated the Capper's restructured limbic lobe, which sent a message to the cranial nerves, which translated the impulse into a smile. The Capper grinned with burnt-brown teeth and a throaty chuckle emerged from his ravaged vocal chords; a long, low laugh sounding like the scratch of rusty 48

nails on dry earth.

The laugh had not yet finished when a car burst into the courtyard and screeched to a halt outside number 11. The Capper stood

motionless as two men jumped from the vehicle. The first was carrying a sledgehammer, which he swung in a low arc to shatter the lock on the front door. Two more blows, and the door burst open, both men shouting all the while, yelling expletives over and over again, cries that marines might use to psyche themselves up as they charge into battle. The creature's optical circuits, sewn into the cemetery thug's stolen retinas, registered two, then four objects fly through the open door: milk bottles filled with petrol, burning rags stuffed into the bottlenecks.

The glass shattered, the petrol splashed and ignited, and number 11 caught fire.

The creature noted the sequence of events, still smiling not from amuse-ment, but because there were more important things to do than to rearrange the facial muscles. The default systems easily considered the means of survival, while the Capper's autonomic nervous system responded with fear and rage. Acetylcholine flooded the ruined body to counteract the adrenalin.

Then, the creature escaped.

The Doctor saw the car pull up, the men attack the door and the fire begin.

As he called to Roz and Chris, number 11's doorway was already filled with flame. The two men – one black, one white, both probably teenagers – ran back to the car and drove off. The car careered in a wide circle to exit the Quadrant through the alley next to the east stairwell. It scraped its left side along the alley's brick wall, scattering sparks.

The Doctor, Roz and Chris ran on to the walkway as Winnie Tyler stepped out of her door. Many more doors opened as the Doctor took charge, in his element once more.

27 July 1987

The first fire engine arrived at 00.10, followed three minutes later by police cars and an ambulance. Roz noted with disdain that a twenty-minute response time would have had heads rolling in Spaceport Five's Undercity, but here it was no more than people expected. Nevertheless, she realized that the delay had acted in the Doctor's favour. Half an hour ago he had been an object of suspicion, Chris and Roz more so *police*, Winnie Tyler's eyes had said. Now, they were heroes. Together, they had organized the evacuation of the Quadrant's

south wall, keeping the other residents back, hammering on doors to wake the families sleeping above and around the Capper's flat. Mr 49

Djanogly, the caretaker from flat 1, had staggered across the forecourt with a washing-up bowl of water, keen to douse the flames himself and encouraging others to join him. The Doctor had stood in his path to stop him. Mr Djanogly, a man in his sixties complete with the wild eyebrows of old age and wiry hairs sprouting from his neck and chin, had protested, saying that he wasn't afraid of no fire. The Doctor spoke in a quiet, still voice which seemed to carry across the noise of the burning and the crowd, telling all who stood there, 'It's not the fire. We don't know what else is inside that flat.'

Now, most people had congregated along the first-floor walkway of the north wall to watch the emergency services taking over. Kettles had been boiled and tea was dispensed, as well as six-packs of beer and sandwiches which Mr Skinner had ordered his wife to make. All in all, thought Roz, quite a good party. The initial shock was becoming nervous laughter, a laughter spiked with *There but for the grace of God go I*, as everyone watched the firefighters and speculated who, if anyone, had died in the inferno. Sympathy focused on the Lonsdale family (number 10), the Charlesworth family (number 12) and the Marquess sisters (number 35, directly above the Capper's).

After the petrol had burnt itself out, the fire had slowed, damaging only these three properties. The Lonsdales, the Charlesworths and the Marquess sisters simultaneously cried out their distress and thanked their good luck in surviving. Mrs Lonsdale was anticipating aloud a deep-green carpet for the new home which the council would have to provide.

Taking a sandwich, Roz muttered to the Doctor, 'You couldn't have planned this better.' He looked surprised, so she continued, 'One minute you're saying how every home's a fortress, the next minute here we are, meeting them all.

And I think they like us, now.'

'I never said I wanted them to like us,' said the Doctor. 'That's the last thing on my list of priorities.' He moved away from Roz, pushing through the crowd, eyes darting left and right as though calculating the importance of each individual, then either dismissing them or making a mental no to return to their company at some point. He did, however take a sandwich and put it behind the rim of his hat for future consideration.

Someone else pushed his way along the landing, someone rather more nervous but equally intent on getting the best from this unlikely congregation.

David Daniels pushed back his hair, wishing it thicker, practised his smile and headed for Chris.

David, having returned from his sister's at nine o'clock, had spent the evening watching TV – a repeat of *Watching*, followed by *The Jimmy Young Television Programme*, and he wondered at the imagination of whoever had come up with that awesome title. Vaguely, at the back of his mind, he had 50

begun to worry whether Harry was all right. The bedroom door had stayed shut all day, and no food had gone from the fridge. But David had decided that, like most things, it could wait until tomorrow. Anyway, Harry always told him to keep his nose out of his business.

David had then jumped to the window when the commotion began, finding his glasses again, and he stayed there for fifteen minutes, thinking that this was better than a video any day. Outside, the tall blond newcomer acted like a hero, marshalling people across the square, shouting at kids to keep back and smiling despite the confusion. The man's vigour and athleticism gave David momentary cause for concern. 'Must be straight,' David said to himself, but then, deciding that faint heart never won fair something-or-other, he went to the bathroom, stripping off his T-shirt.

There, in the very place where Harry Harvey had studied his sewing, David looked at his reflection, despaired, then began the usual search for things to give him hope. He hated his floppy blond hair, but others often gave it compliments – well, they said it was 'nice' – and David tried to fix it in place with Alberto V05 spray. The spray made it too stiff, so he brushed it out again, frantically cleaning his teeth with the other hand. He stopped to consider his face. Nothing special, but then again, nothing freaky, just one deep chicken-pox scar on the side of his nose. All in all, a reasonable face, bordering on handsome in a bad light. He then stepped back to consider his body – hairless, skinny as a kid, but with strips of sinewy muscle and, his favourite feature, wide shoulders. Never mind the boil on the shoulder blade.

The survey complete, David ran to the living room where his clothes had a permanent home in one small suitcase and five plastic bags, hidden behind the table so they didn't get on Harry's nerves. With uncommon speed, he threw himself into his old 'Relax' T-shirt and his best jeans – best meaning old, well-faded and fraying, with folds in just the right places. He almost took them off again as he thought of changing into his one and only pair of Calvins, just in case he got very very lucky, but then he realized that they were in the wash, and besides, luck on that scale existed only in the realms of science-fiction.

Finally, he was ready to join the throng. A small part of his mind thought of the fire and hoped that no one had been hurt, but frankly such things were beyond his control and therefore not worth the worry.

The blond man stood out like a beacon, he was so tall. He stood at the

far end of the walkway, being thanked by the Marquess sisters. As David got closer, he was not disappointed. The man had a broad, well-defined jaw and a body like Miles Colby, and the fading fire cast him in romantic light. One side of his face was streaked with soot and the dirt made him seem less perfect, more approachable. David was thinking of his opening line when the man suddenly turned from the Marquess sisters, no doubt glad to be rid of them as 51

they launched into another anecdote about the Blitz, and practically bumped into David. David did something that he thought only happened in comics and tabloid prose: he gulped. The newcomer towered above him.

'Hello, I'm David,' he said, all wit and originality jumping ship at the precise moment they were needed, the traitors.

'Hello. My name's Chris,' said the man, but David was barely listening, he was staring at the man's ear and mentally jumping up and down with glee, shouting, thank you, God, oh yes oh yes oh yes, he's got an earring, *he's got an earring in his* right *ear –!*

Further along the walkway, old Mrs Hearn had come down to the first floor and watched as the last flames were extinguished, and firefighters cautiously entered the charcoal shell of number 11. Flakes of white ash drifted through the air and she brushed them from her face. Fire, she thought, always fire, and she found herself crying; not for the disaster, but for the fire of nine days ago, when she had seen Simon Jenkins ignite.

Someone offered her a handkerchief. She took it, without realizing that her benefactor was the little man, the one who had arrived this afternoon. She spoke, not to him, but to anyone and herself. 'Old Testament justice, the only justice left. Fire and damnation. I didn't think I'd live to see such times.' She paused, wiped her nose, smiled a grim smile. 'There's plenty say they deserve it. Simon Jenkins, and whoever's moved in there since. And God knows, I've wished worse on them myself, wished them gone from this place. I've even prayed for such a thing, asked God himself to take these people and leave us safe. But no one deserves this. To end your life in flames. A terrible death.'

Then she looked at her silent companion and remembered that Mrs Skinner had told her his name. 'I'm sorry, Doctor, don't go listening to me. It's just I've seen enough fire in the past fortnight to last the rest of my life. Every waking day, all I can smell is petrol and smoke, and now it's come back. I looked out of my window, thought it was one of

my bad dreams, tried to pinch myself awake. But it's real. Every time it happens, it's real.'

Still the Doctor said nothing, but he smiled at her, and unlike most smiles, this one seemed to have an effect; it took the burden from her back. Mrs Hearn had felt guilty about the Capper's death – she could have moved faster, could have said something clever, could have knocked the lighter from his hand, something, anything. And if that first fire had been her fault, then tonight's, by association, was her fault also. But the Doctor's smile told her *no*, his face so calm and sad and somehow so old, despite the fact that he must be over thirty years younger than her.

Mrs Hearn stood back from the parapet, still embarrassed by tears at eighty-seven years of age. She said, 'That tea looks nice.' Without a word, the Doctor 52

edged past a couple of bystanders, lifted two mugs off Mrs Skinner's tray and brought them back to his new friend. When he spoke, Mrs Hearn was charmed by his Scottish burr, remembering an old, dead boyfriend from seventy years ago.

'Somewhere in the universe, the tea's getting cold,' said the Doctor. 'I try to remind myself of that whenever things get too bad.'

'Then you must drink a lot of tea,' said Mrs Hearn, and they both laughed.

Then she said, 'You did very well out there. Seems you joined us at just the right moment.'

'It's a knack,' said the Doctor.

'Oh, then you do this all the time?' she laughed.

He leant over the parapet as if weighed down by a heavy burden, and he said in a weary voice, 'Yes. All the time.'

Mrs Hearn straightened her skirt and brushed more ash from her hair. Why are you doing that? she wondered. Shame on you, Eileen Hearn, eighty-seven years old and you're flirting with the man.

She copied his position, though he did not seem to notice her small excitement, and both looked at the flats underneath. Outside number 22, Mr and Mrs Leather had refused to join the first-floor gathering, knowing they would not be welcome. They were swilling down their

front walls in case any stray embers had drifted from the opposite side. Jack and Irene Leather kept up a muttered stream of curses as they protected their property, and when one firewoman came to tell them that it still wasn't safe and they should join the others upstairs, they saw her off with some choice and innovative expletives.

Irene spat at the retreating firewoman while Jack slammed the front door shut, in case anyone in uniform should start prying.

'Scum,' Mrs Hearn told the Doctor. Then abruptly, she asked, 'What sort of doctor brings his practice to a place like this?'

'I'm not that sort of a doctor,' said the Doctor, not looking at her, 'at least, not always. Think of it as an honorary title. You can buy them in the Ascension Islands for a bottle of whisky.'

'So it's Doctor what, exactly?'

'I like plain Doctor.'

'All right then, plain Doctor. We've all been asking what the arrangement is at number 43, you've caused a bit of a stir. Most types we've seen before, but you three, you're a mystery. Now Mrs Skinner, she reckons you're married to the black woman, and that young man's your son. Which I suppose is possible, but Mr Skinner, he maintains that the list had three separate surnames. Mrs Thomas and Mrs Evans that's them over there, the one with the tracksuit bottoms and the short one next to her – they reckon you're the dad and the other two's adopted. So go on. Which is it to be?'

The Doctor looked at her, eyes glittering with humour. 'Let's just say we're family.'

'In other words, I should mind my own business. Doctor, you've only been here half a day and you've learnt our ways already.' She meant it as a joke, but he did not smile.

Winnie Tyler hoisted Gabriel up in the air and let him sit on her forearm, both his arms around her neck, as she carried him on to the walkway. She struggled under his weight but kept him there like something which must be endured for a greater purpose. Bev and Carl were sitting on the stairwell, sharing a sly cigarette. Carl threw it away as he saw Winnie watching, but she directed her temper elsewhere. A cigarette hardly mattered, when Carl was in the

doghouse for something far more serious.

Winnie was glad that Bev and Carl also would hear her words. She knew that the children hated her temper, her nagging, her constant invasion of their lives, but they were too young to understand. Winnie had to be brutal with her kids. It would cause them to survive. And if they despised her as a result, then that was a necessary price to pay.

Children had to know the truth of things. If Winnie's own mother had been as severe with her, then Winnie might not have made so many mistakes.

Winnie took Gabriel to the parapet and pointed at the remains of number 11. Her voice was trembling, but stem. 'Now just you look at that, Gabriel Tyler. There's bodies in there, for all we know, maybe grown men burnt to coal, and if they're dead then it's by their own hand. Live by the sword and die by the sword, I've told you that, haven't I? And there's the proof. Look at me when I'm talking to you –' Gabriel had turned away, but now looked at Winnie with a solemn expression, sticking out his bottom lip. 'They've brought those flames on themselves,' Winnie continued, more passion in her voice, 'and if they suffered as they died, Gabriel, if they screamed and begged for their mothers and roasted their hands trying to put out their burning hair, then we should be glad. They're vermin, them and their kind. Thieves and junkies and liars, Godless souls, each and every one, and you're not to go near them, d'you understand? Promise me now, promise your mother, you're to stay away and never touch filth like that. You associate with the likes of them and you'll burn in hell, Gabriel, you and all your family. You'll spend all eternity listening to your poor mother and your poor sister and brother crying out in pain, all because of what you did. Now *promise*?'

Gabriel was close to tears, and as he nodded and mouthed the word

'promise', he did start to cry. He buried his head in his mother's neck. Winnie's voice changed and she stroked her son's head, whispering endearments, kissing the soft crook of his arm, telling him, 'Hush now, hush, your mother's 54

here and you're fine, little man. I've got you and you've got me, both of us safe.' The words lilted into a half-song as if Gabriel were a baby rather than nine years old.

Winnie could see people glancing in her direction, wondering what sort of mother would deliberately reduce her own child to tears. They

looked at her with contempt, but she could bear the hostility. Mrs Hearn, of course, cast her a spiteful look but Winnie ignored it.

No one else could understand what she had to do; how important it was that the Tyler children survived this godforsaken place.

Roz watched Mrs Tyler and the boy. A strange sort of motherhood, thought Roz, but then, what do I know?

Then she saw the Doctor standing next to an old woman. They were also watching the Tylers, the old woman's lips pursed in disapproval as though she had witnessed this behaviour many times before. The Doctor caught Roz's eye, and he signalled mute instructions, looking at Winnie and Gabriel, then the crowd around them. Roz understood what she had to do, though not why.

The Doctor was telling her to keep watch on the Tylers and to gauge others'

reactions to the mother and son.

She leant against the wall, lit a cigarette and began her surveillance. It proved instantly rewarding. Mrs Tyler shifted Gabriel further up her chest and her shirt-sleeve revealed a hammock of flesh dangling beneath her upper arm. There, her skin was marked with old, small scars, a dozen or so two-inch slashes of white criss-crossed in a random pattern. An ugly image shot into Roz's mind: Winnie Tyler raising her arms to protect her face in a blizzard of razor blades.

'I suppose Mrs Tyler's got a point,' the Doctor said to Mrs Hearn, 'but the boy's terrified.' He leant in to her as though knowing he had stepped into dangerous territory.

'It's not easy bringing up kids round here,' said Mrs Hearn, uncomfortably aware of the cliche. She spoke in Winnie's defence without any real conviction. The Doctor's expression was shrewd and patient. Mrs Hearn shifted her weight on to her back foot, suddenly thinking, you can't lie to this man.

He's pleasant enough, but he can smell a lie from a mile off, careful what you say, Eileen. She stuttered, her voice trembling, 'She keeps herself to herself.

Winnie's a difficult woman.'

'In what way?' asked the Doctor.

Mrs Hearn hoped to cam his friendship with a confidence, saying quietly,

‘She drinks.’

The Doctor fixed his stare upon her. ‘Is there a reason for that?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Hearn quickly. ‘Not that I know, anyway. And I’m not one to criticize, Doctor. In fairness to Winnie, she works every day – just sticking leaflets in envelopes, three quid a box. But it keeps her at home, it means she’s there when the kids come in from school.’ Mrs Hearn heard her tone becoming hostile, a particular voice she used when arguing with a man to whom she was attracted. ‘She doesn’t declare the money she earns, if that’s what you’re after.’

The Doctor shook his head and smiled. The anger between them passed.

Mrs Hearn considered that his smile was a remarkable thing; you could tumble into that smile and happily lose yourself there. Mrs Hearn knew that her age belied the fact that she’d had enough wild, hot times of her own in the past, and she inched closer to the Doctor and said, ‘There’s no husband. Mr Tyler’s long gone. Winnie’s proof that there’s precious little men are needed for. Apart from the obvious.’

‘But that’s the point,’ said the Doctor, not returning the flirtation. ‘She can manage, her kids are fine and she’s keeping them above the breadline. So what’s wrong with her?’

Mrs Hearn stepped back and she thought, damn him, he makes you relax then he’s in there, that powerful instinct cutting straight to the heart. Shut up, Eileen, shut up. ‘That’s a very simple world you live in, Doctor. Does there need to be something wrong for a woman to allow herself a little drink now and again? We’ve all got our failings, they don’t need a cause.’ Mrs Hearn looked away. This man had twisted the conversation to bring her to argue in Winnie’s favour, which Mrs Hearn had never thought possible, given all that she knew. She hoped a bland generalization would end the discussion, and said, ‘I don’t know why you’re asking me about Mrs Tyler. How do I know what’s going on in her head? If she’s got her problems, then haven’t we all?’

She paused, then said softly, ‘“The world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.”’

The phrase calmed her, as it always did. It evoked a memory of school, a quiet, spacious classroom long ago. Shafts of sunlight picked out motes of chalk dust in the air as a young Eileen stood up to recite proudly her weekend's homework, the poem she had learnt, of which one line survived in memory and surfaced whenever Winnie Tyler became the topic of conversation.

The Doctor repeated it. '"The world's more full of weeping than you can understand."' Mrs Hearn froze. She had thought that it would mean nothing to him, that it would stop his questions. She could not have been prepared for the sheer intelligence which blazed from his eyes, and she thought, he's done it again, he's hypnotized me and drawn the phrase out, that secret mantra which excused all that Winnie Tyler had done. Don't look at him, Eileen, he can see it all, he can see your soul.

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Mrs Hearn shifted from foot to foot, a gulp of tea sticking in her throat and her heart hammering as she heard herself saying, 'Time I got back. All the fun's over.'

The Doctor gave her an acid look, then he drained the last of his tea. He turned away, obviously disappointed by Mrs Hearn's reticence. She heard him mutter, 'Seventy-six fortresses.'

She wanted to say sorry. For all her caution she wanted to tell this little man what she knew, the secret only she and poor Sylvie Harvey had shared, but the habits of living twenty-two years in the same housing block proved stronger than the Doctor's inquisition, and she turned away. She felt the weight of her years and she wanted to go home – not the flat on the walkway above, but a mythical home surrounded by schoolday sunlight, untroubled by the smell of petrol and smoke. Then she walked upstairs, alone, to wash the soot off her windows.

'And that's Mrs Hearn,' David told Chris. 'Nice enough, gives you the time of day and that's more than you can say for most of them round here.' He continued chattering, giving spicy biographies of Mrs Thomas and Mrs Evans, including a detailed run-down of the origin and cost of Mrs Thomas's tracksuit bottoms, while Chris wondered why this young man was so nervous.

There was no danger from the fire, so that couldn't be the reason. David Daniels had been grinning and talking as if he were being paid

by the word.

Chris had been utterly confused when David had babbled a string of proper nouns – *Maggie McFly's, The Glory Hole, Sweat Box, Marilyn's* – before realizing that these were nightclubs. Strangely, David had been disappointed when Chris admitted that he had never heard of them, let alone frequented them.

David's smile then returned when Chris said that he was new in town, and perhaps he'd have time to visit these places soon.

Things became even more cryptic when David had claimed to recognize one of the firemen – apparently, this man was a friend of Dorothy and Chris looked around the walkway, wondering if Dorothy was one of his neighbours, or if Ace had appeared. Rather than waving at the fireman, David had stepped back from the parapet to half-hide behind Chris's shoulder, muttering about late nights in a hotel near the airport with a bottle of poppers, whatever they were.

David's next *non sequitur* in his grasshopper conversation was, 'Oh, he's alive then.' Chris paid attention once more as David indicated the window of a flat on the east wall. A man in his fifties was at the window, his dressing-gown pulled tight as a straitjacket around him. He was pale, staring at the courtyard and talking to himself. 'That's Harry,' continued David, with disdain. 'Sad old bastard but he leaves me alone. So long as I clean the fridge once a fortnight, 57

he's happy.'

'Oh, so that's where you live?' said Chris.

'Yeah,' said David, 'me and Harry.' Then Chris saw David's face flush red for some reason. 'I mean, live, as in settee, you know. The flats on the east wall have only got one bedroom, you're on the posh side. So Harry's got the bedroom and I'm outside. Not, you know. It was his wife, I knew his wife, not Harry himself. Although I know him now, obviously, but I don't *know* him know him. In the biblical sense,' and David laughed, a nervous chirp. 'He was married, you see. Well, he would be if he had a wife, wouldn't he? And I'm not. Obviously.'

'Obviously,' said Chris, not understanding a word, then he pretended he wanted another cup of tea, made his farewells and pushed his way along the landing. With a parting smile at David, he wondered if the devices on board the TARDIS which translated a planet's speech patterns were working properly.

Roz saw Chris approaching and signalled him to stay away. Chris understood and fell into conversation with Mrs Thomas and Mrs Evans, both of whom wasted no time in asking to feel his biceps, roaring with laughter as they did so.

Roz did not want Chris to interrupt the pattern. She understood now why the Doctor had indicated the crowd in relation to Winnie Tyler and her son.

A subtle but distinct pattern of behaviour settled around mother and child.

There were plenty of women with their children on the walkway, but Gabriel –

making no gesture, perhaps not realizing it himself – took centre stage. His mother did not seem to notice anything strange. One by one, the Quadrant's inhabitants would make their way to Gabriel, not to talk but simply to acknowledge him. The Marquess sisters had approached the boy, the elder sister standing on tip-toe to kiss his cheek. Elsewhere, the bruised woman, Mrs Skinner, instigated a human chain with the sole intent of making sure that a cup of soup was passed to the little boy. Even the blond lad who had been chatting up Chris went out of his way to weave through the crowd, then peeked over Winnie's shoulder and said, 'All right, big feller?' to Gabriel, before walking away, his duty done. Each visit to Gabriel was a separate thing. There seemed to be no group consciousness dictating that they should pay homage to the child. But nevertheless, the subliminal pattern went on as each person, at different times, allied themselves to the invisible court of Gabriel Tyler.

Then a new pattern emerged, one dictated by a far less subtle source – a police uniform. The crowd grew tense, the laughter, chat and tears evaporating as a police constable made his way on to the walkway. Roz thought that, no matter how many times she complained about an Adjudicator's body armour, 58

at least she never had to wear a daft, pointy black hat like this poor sod.

The policeman was asking for information – specifically, whether anyone had noted the number of the firebombers' car. One by one, everyone he approached muttered a denial, and one by one, all those asked kept watching as the policeman slowly made his way to the Doctor. Roz realized that this was the next test: people still suspected

that she, Chris and the Doctor were tied to the authorities, despite their temporary heroism, and all were keen to see how the Doctor would respond. Certainly, he had been watching the Capper's flat when the attack came, and Roz knew that he would have memorized the registration plate, but when the policeman questioned him, Roz saw the Doctor shake his head. Some members of the crowd relaxed, but most kept watching as the policeman repeated his question. Again, the Doctor shook his head, and this time he reached up to the rim of his hat, found his sandwich and munched it, all the while staring the policeman in the eye. It was a tiny gesture of insolence and it worked. The policeman moved on. If the onlookers had expected the Doctor to deny any knowledge as a perfect way of maintaining his cover, then the subversive sandwich had surprised them and convinced them otherwise. Now, those grateful for his help in the fire clapped him on the back with new enthusiasm and offered more sandwiches. The Doctor caught Roz's eye and his wink seemed to say: we're in.

Bev Tyler and her brother Carl were just making their way back to the flat, both crunching Polo mints to get rid of the smell of cigarette smoke, when the Doctor called out Bev's name and made towards her.

'Who's the twat?' asked Carl, sneering.

'Just some bloke,' said Bev, and she looked down with a sullen face as the Doctor approached. She was embarrassed. Just this afternoon, she had sat with the Doctor like they were friends, she had led him to the Quadrant, she had even cried in front of him without knowing why. Now, she looked back on those events as if they had happened to someone else, some fresh-faced girly first-year with her hair in homework neatly done. Damn damn damn, she thought, I should've walked through Angel Square without stopping, never mind who he is. I could live with the shame of crying if I thought I'd never see him again, now here he is, me bloody neighbour, smiling like he's some sort of uncle and just to make things worse, he's introducing himself to Carl, taking his hat off and giving a bow like some posh git off the telly.

'You must be Beverley's brother,' said the Doctor.

Carl gave a cold, mocking laugh, looking at his sister, then turned to the Doctor. 'Nice clothes, grandad.'

The Doctor fingered his paisley scarf 'Thank you, I think so. Though they're not exactly – how would you put it? Ah yes. Wicked.'

‘ *Wicked?* ’ snorted Carl. ‘Where’ve you been, grandad? No one says wicked any more.’

‘Really?’ said the Doctor, crestfallen. ‘In 1987. . . ? I could have sworn they did.’

Bev wanted to die of shame as Carl pushed past the Doctor, with a final cruel glance at her. She wanted to follow but stayed rooted to the spot. The Doctor looked at her and seemed to despair. She felt a small burn of power; no one could get past her sulky face.

‘Where were you standing, Bev?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Round about here?’ Bev stayed sulky, uncomprehending and determined to stay quiet, until he went further. ‘It must have been here. Just outside your front door, nine and a half years ago. And your mother was, where? Heading for that stairwell?’

‘Shut up,’ hissed Bev, suddenly vicious. She jerked her head to indicate her mother standing a few feet away, showing Gabriel to yet another admirer.

‘Ah, then it’s a secret,’ said the Doctor, putting one hand to his chin, his index finger stroking his lip.

Course it’s a bloody secret, now shut your face.’

‘Well, I wasn’t to know,’ said the Doctor, his voice descending to a whisper.

‘You talked to me about it this morning and we’d only just met – How was I to know that you’ve never told your mother what you saw?’

‘Course I never told her, stupid.’ She could feel the swell of blood at the front of her face, unwelcome tears rimming her eyes. ‘An’ I wish I’d never told you, so leave it.’

‘Oh, Bev,’ said the Doctor in a winter’s voice, and in the corner of his eye the now-dead fire seemed to burn still, a flicker of red and gold. ‘If only I could.

If only I could.’

Bev barged past him, ran into the flat, went straight to her bedroom and cocooned herself in the duvet, all the while telling herself that

these tears had been caused by the smoke. Outside, she heard the ambulance leave, then the fire engines and police cars, then the last of the chattering crowd. Bev heard Mum come back in and the creak of Gabriel's door as she put him to bed.

Then, by sound alone, Bev could tell that Mum was pouring herself a drink –

the first of many, thought Bev. Even this commonplace realization forced out more tears, and Bev squeezed her hands into fists and pushed them into her eyes, pressing hard, the vision beneath her eyelids exploding into balls of orange and black. She released the pressure with a gasp then repeated the action, hell-bent on causing herself pain. At least pain was ordinary, at least pain was something she could understand. And pain would keep her awake, for in her dreams there lay the threat of Christmases past and strange little men who would not leave her alone, strange little men who knew the truth.

And why am I crying, she asked herself over and over again. While her 60

public tears were rare, she'd often crawl under the duvet for a good, punishing sob – when she had lost her virginity to Jake McAuliffe and he'd boasted about it to his mates; when the Abbott gang from the Baxter estate took the piss out of her mum after they'd seen her drunk mid-afternoon; when her friend Ida Constantino had walked past her without saying hello, because Ida's dad had won the Pools and they were almost rich and certainly better than Quadrant kids. But now; why now?

She could not understand, and part of her did not want to understand.

When she thought of the Doctor and Christmas Eve 1977, she touched on something raw and wild in her soul, a dread which clutched her guts and quickened her breath, but which refused to enter her consciousness. It slipped out of her grasp like quicksilver, shifting away from definition and resolution.

It crept back into shadow-memory, there to lurk and giggle and fester.

Bev Tyler curled up in the den of her duvet and resolved to stay awake.

Within ten minutes she had fallen asleep, and the dreams came.

While the rest of the Quadrant went to sleep, or mimicked the actions

of sleep, in flat 43 things were discussed and plans were made. The ambulance had departed empty, so Roz and Chris reckoned that no one had died in the firebombing, though the Doctor pointed out that the emergency services would only be looking for a human corpse.

'We'll know more when we have a look ourselves,' said the Doctor, back in position in the unlit kitchen, watching the two remaining policemen patrolling the area around the Capper's flat. 'Once they're gone, we'll pop down.'

'All of a sudden, we're on the wrong side of the law,' said Roz. She knew why the Doctor had lied to the police and she would have done the same herself, but the fact did not sit easily with her years of training. Instinctively, it felt wrong. She continued, 'Forty-six years, that's all it's taken. Decline and fall. When we lived in 1941, it was a different world. It wasn't perfect, but there was. . . I don't know. Order.'

'You could leave your front door open all day and people looked out for each other,' mused the Doctor, and Roz saw a mischievous sarcasm dance across his face.

'All right,' she said, 'but I wouldn't expect it to degenerate quite so fast. This place has got drug dealers hanging out of every door, and no one says a word, no one reports them to the police. The Quadrant's practically lawless.'

'You can't judge a country by its behaviour in a state of war,' said Chris. 'And let's be honest, Roz. In the England of 1941, we moved in charmed circles. We didn't go hungry, we had good jobs – face it, we enjoyed ourselves. Perhaps if we'd have been stationed in a terraced house in the East End, we'd have seen a different side of life. One not so removed from this.'

'And in 1941,' added the Doctor, 'six million Jews were being exterminated, not that far from where we were. You're right, Chris. We were lucky.'

'Okay, I've got the message,' said Roz defensively, with the irritating feeling that both men were ganging up on her. She lit a cigarette, breathed in deeply, then hissed a stream of thin, blue smoke out between her teeth. She said quietly, 'But you can't deny that something's gone wrong somewhere. At least in 1941, people were fighting for a principle, for a better future. Surely they didn't imagine

this?'

'If a model of a future society is absolutely intact forty-six years after its conception, then it's more than likely that you're living in a dictatorship,' said the Doctor. 'If you're after order, Roz, then you should have helped the Nazis to win.'

There was an uncomfortable silence. Then the Doctor smiled, stepped forward and held Roz's arm, a rare moment of physical contact between them. 'I can't wholly defend this place,' he said, 'nor can I condemn it. It's not my place to do so, I leave that to others – and frankly, I'm suspicious of anyone who delivers a final verdict on whether a society is good or bad, right or wrong. But I think perhaps you're judging this place by its criminality, and I don't think that's fair. When I spoke of seventy-six fortresses, I didn't mean to imply that each and every front door hides some dark, terrible secret. Certainly, there's the Capper's flat, and I've heard a rumour or two about the Leathers on the ground floor, but that's two doors out of many.'

Roz nodded, well aware and grateful that the Doctor was carefully avoiding one crucial argument: that she preferred 1941 because it was the home of Lieutenant George Reed. So she changed the subject, pinpointing one particular front door, the Tylers'. The Doctor rubbed his hands together like an excited kid, and hopped up to sit on the formica worksurface. 'Yes, now, tell me what you saw.'

Roz described the crowd's behaviour around Gabriel Tyler, and Chris interrupted, repeating what the Doctor had taught him about Ricky McIlveen, long ago in the twenty-first century. 'An alpha male, right? A single individual who dominates the actions of a whole group. The crowd doesn't know it but on a deep unconscious level they look to the alpha male for subliminal signals, instructions on how the pack should behave.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor and Chris beamed. 'And no.' Chris's smile fell. 'The alpha male is aware of these properties, even if he can't define them,' the Doctor continued. 'Consciously or subconsciously, whether he likes it or not, he manipulates. Gabriel Tyler has little or no notion of what he can do.'

'He's only nine,' said Chris.

'Doesn't matter,' said the Doctor. 'At the age of nine, Ricky McIlveen would have had a fair idea of his powers. He'd have learnt to hate them already. Our 62

friend Gabriel just cuddled his mother, and the most important thing in his world was getting his hands on a Cup-A-Soup. Now tell me, what did Gabriel Tyler look like? Describe him. What colour was his hair?'

'Blond,' said Chris, and Roz frowned at him.

'Not exactly blond,' she said. 'Darker, I'd say – it was hard to tell in that light.'

'We were under the security lights,' said the Doctor, enjoying himself. 'You both had a perfectly good view.'

Roz squinted, trying to picture Gabriel. She thought, strange, just as you focus the picture shifts. 'There were hints of blond, she said, 'but it was dark underneath. Quite dark, in fact.'

'No,' said Chris, 'it was blond. Maybe a dark shade, but still blond.'

Before they could argue, the Doctor interrupted, a wide smile creasing his face, 'And skin colour?'

'Caucasian,' said Chris, then he huffed in annoyance as Roz held up one hand to stop him.

'No, hold on a minute,' she said. 'He was white, but I did wonder about his parentage. There's a bit of colour somewhere in his past, he's more olive-skinned –'

Again, the Doctor interrupted and he clicked his heels together in childish excitement. 'General build? Fat, skinny, what?'

Chris, looking at the Doctor with suspicion, said slowly,

'About average. Maybe a bit big for his age.'

'No,' said Roz, 'maybe a bit small for his age.' Then Roz and Chris looked at the Doctor, waiting for the explanation that would surely come, both feeling akin to laboratory mice.

'Just as I thought,' said the Doctor, leaping down from the kitchen cabinet and craning round to see the Tylers' flat out of the window, his fingers drumming a fast tattoo on the sink. 'It's called a Glamour. An old term of magic, an enchantment of physical appearance, making the wearer seem more attractive. And no less appropriate when applied to a psychic. When you look at Gabriel Tyler, you see

something of yourself reflected back – Chris, you see him as large, blond and white, Roz, you see someone short, dark, coloured.

Everyone who looks at that boy sees something different, something familiar, something which makes them respond kindly. That's why everyone paid him their respects. They'd just been through a crisis and needed reassuring, so they sought out their mirror image. Fascinating.'

'Surely someone's noticed the discrepancy?' said Roz. 'They must've noticed he looks completely different to every person that sees him.'

'Not at all,' said the Doctor. 'Underneath, there's a real little boy. If you saw his photograph, you'd see the real Gabriel and you'd just think it wasn't a very 63

good photo, not quite capturing what you see. The Glamour's nothing more than a shiver on water. It's a subtle thing, almost invisible, and like all good magic, it goes unquestioned.'

'Does he know he's got this power?' asked Chris.

The Doctor shook his head. 'I doubt it. Those capable of casting a Glamour are ranked as low-level psychics. Gabriel Tyler probably thinks he leads a charmed life, that's all. People would be less inclined to get cross with him. If he goes to school without his homework, the teacher would just smile and pat his head, while the boy next to him gets detention. His mum would make him a sandwich while she gives Bev hell. When he's an old man, even older men will give him a seat on the bus. The world's full of people casting slight, casual Glamours. Even in your time, there must have been those who got good jobs without ever showing any intelligence or application. That's the Glamour at work, guiding them through. It's a benign talent, essentially passive.

Those with Glamour tend to live long and happy lives, without ever achieving anything great. They can coast through the years without much effort. If anything, the Glamour tends to take the edge off things, they don't need to try as hard as the rest of their species. They're generally classified by those around them as nice. Not brilliant, not special, just nice. It's a life lived on automatic pilot, not something I would envy. Glamour's a fragile thing. If Gabriel Tyler robbed a bank or punched someone in the face, he'd find his Glamour had deserted him. You saw tonight, there was no way he could shut out his mother's anger. Glamour doesn't stand up to a challenge.'

The Doctor was pacing around the kitchen, fiddling with the few utensils which lay on the table. Roz thought that if the Constantino family had left the full inventory and a well-stocked fridge, the Doctor would have cooked a three course meal by now, just for the sake of something to do with his hands.

Instead, he took off his straw hat, rolled it into a tube, then unrolled it and repeated the procedure over and over again, his face suddenly much younger as he went on, 'I could find you a thousand Gabriel Tylers, but what does interest me is the fact that a contaminated batch of cocaine has forced its way to this very vicinity. Coincidence?'

Roz and Chris laughed as he shot the question at them, his eyes sparkling.

'Doctor,' said Roz, 'I gave up on coincidence a long time ago. Roughly in the same moment as I saw my first police telephone box.'

'This makes things so much more interesting,' said the Doctor. Then he added as an afterthought, 'And in all probability, so much worse. We're still in the causal loop, still engaged with human psi-powers. But to what end?'

'Doctor,' said Chris with a sly smile, 'If the Glamour reflects back an aspect of the onlooker, then what did Gabriel Tyler look like to you?'

'Ahh,' said the Doctor. He tapped the side of his nose and said no more.

* * *

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Two doors down, Bev Tyler's bed was a pool of cold sweat, but the clammy sheets were not enough to wake her from insistent dreams. She thrashed in her sleep, one fist punching the wall, the anaglypta scratching her skin open.

Bev was lost in winter, a dark Christmas of weak snow and muttered voices: her mother's and the Tall Man's.

Mum's on the walkway and –

Mum and the Tall Man in the street and –

The Tall Man's turning away, he's leaving, and he's –

Bev shocked herself awake, remembering nothing but her fear. She saw the faint blood on the side of her palm, accepted it as something she deserved and sucked the cut. For the first time in years, she wished that Mum would hear her, would come into her room and cradle her and sing her into untroubled sleep. But her mother was drunk, asleep in her chair, and did not come.

Chapter 5

The last policeman left the Capper's flat at five in the morning, so daylight was already bleaching the sky as the Doctor, Roz and Chris made their way to the remains of flat 11. They crossed the courtyard while five miles to the north – five unfortunate miles outside the Doctor's perception of events –

Steven Jericho had a visitor.

The woman at reception said good morning to Mrs Jericho, but Mrs Jericho walked past as if no one had spoken. She concentrated instead on the click of her heels on the grey tiled floor, the only audible sound on the top floor of the Frei Institute. She kept her steps rhythmic, regular as a metronome as she walked through reception, down the white corridor, past the smoked glass screens which shaped the mouth of the ward and into the ward itself.

She approached its solitary patient.

'You're in early,' smiled the attendant nurse and Mrs Jericho smiled back.

The nurse was qualified and good at her job whereas the receptionist, Mrs Jericho knew, was unimportant. Receptionists were ten-a-penny, receptionists were the girls who had mocked her throughout childhood, had whispered insults about Eva Jericho because she was smartly dressed and handed her homework in on time. Receptionists were women now paying the price for wasting their education, condemned to spend their lives sitting behind other people's desks and taking other people's phone calls. Receptionists deserved to be ignored, and ignoring them gave Mrs Jericho a small but hot pleasure.

'Always up at daylight,' said Mrs Jericho brightly, flicking her hair into place.

She reached into the bedside cabinet, took out a tube of two per cent

hydrocortisone cream, squeezed a blob into her palm and massaged the cream into Steven's feet, a task she completed every morning. She paid special attention to the heels, where the skin was dry and scaly like the hide of an old, sun-dried lizard.

Steven said nothing, perhaps noticed nothing. His eyes were closed, the lower part of his face covered with a transparent blue plastic mask. A thick, ridged tube connected the mask to a ventilator at the side of the bed. The ventilator wheezed at regular intervals, a steady beat in which Mrs Jericho found order and reassurance. She looked at Steven, noting that everything was in place. The cannula on the back of each hand led to a saline drip, wires patched to his chest led to the heart monitor, a complex knot of tubes inserted 67

into his groin took care of his waste products, discreetly channelling them to a nearby primary-yellow safe-bin, and thin red electrodes ringed his forehead, a modem, bloodless crown of thorns. He was a human being suspended in a web of machinery; he was her son.

'No change?' asked Mrs Jericho, taking a medicated tissue to wipe the hydrocortisone cream off her fingers. The nurse smiled sadly and shook her head, although the question had been rhetorical. There had been no change in young Steven's condition for three months. This condition came as no surprise to his mother. She thought bleakly that his entire life had been a slow, steady descent into this coma. From the moment he was born, many and varied illnesses had stalked him – first epilepsy at six months old, accompanied by problems with his hearing, vision and coordination, followed eighteen months later by a rare form of osteoporosis, so rare that, all these years later, it still awaited proper definition. At the same time, anaemia was diagnosed, but when they tried to alter his diet, severe anaphylactic shock had manifested itself, along with the twin demons of eczema and psoriasis. At the age of six, Steven had lost the use of his right eye. Two years later an emergency operation on a brain haemorrhage had saved his life, although he had not walked since.

The latest diagnosis was particularly exotic: Guillain-Barré syndrome, which a Harley Street doctor had suggested in desperation. While portions of Steven's plasma were dutifully exchanged for an albumin replacement, Mrs Jericho's husband had seized upon Guillain-Barré syndrome's concept, using it constantly, rolling the three words into one, making the diagnosis his own, special friend. Alfred Jericho needed definitions, he clung to them and used them to give some sort of discipline to the chaos of his son's life, and the medical terms acted as charms to halt the plaintive questions from family and friends. Mrs

Jericho was more cynical. She had learnt to distrust the words of doctors.

By now, they knew that Guillain-Barré syndrome had been a hopeful and hopeless diagnosis. It half-explained the distal paresthesias which 1987 had ushered in as a terrifying guest, but beyond that there lay symptoms over which the finest and most expensive specialists could only tut and call for more tests. By now, Mrs Jericho associated all these incompetent specialists with one particular gesture: a slow shake of the head as each man and woman, flown in from France and America and Egypt and Iran, confessed themselves to be at a loss. Mrs Jericho could measure out her son's life in these sad, sympathetic headshakes; she imagined that Steven's pall-bearers would carry the same expression.

She envisaged the funeral – the flowers, the hymns, the guests – with great precision. At the back of her wardrobe there was a black Jean Muir dress, 68

shrouded in cellophane, unworn since its purchase, one of the few objects in Mrs Jericho's bedroom safe from her scissors, safe from mutilation. It was not a conscious decision to leave the dress alone – sometimes her hand would stray towards it, she would look at the jet-black cotton and consider it for wearing that week, perhaps to the theatre, perhaps to a charity function, only to replace it and move on. And a malignant part of her subconscious would nod, would say, save it, that's the dress, the perfect dress for Steven's funeral.

The other preparations for that inevitable day were far more conscious.

In the early hours of the morning when the plans would spring unbidden into Mrs Jericho's mind – long, sleepless nights in which her scissors would be bus-ier than ever – she would go through the expected reactions. She would cry, she would scream her husband awake, she would kneel by the toilet and make herself vomit, and always she would listen to the Voice in her head. But at the same time, if she were honest – if anyone were honest – a funeral-to-come promises undoubted magnificence, a ceremony as splendid and seductive as a fine, ancient ruin. Grief and martyrdom and pity are the most wonderful things, and they were coming Mrs Jericho's way.

She felt a twinge of this secret delight and simultaneously felt ashamed of such thoughts as the nurse asked if she wanted a cup of tea. The nurse's eyes were wide and kind, shining with sympathy. Mrs

Jericho considered that this sympathy was well-earnt. Silently, she declined the offer and the nurse continued, 'If you want to pop out for an hour or so later on, there'll always be someone here. To look after him. And Dr Greco doesn't expect any change in Steven's condition, not yet. If you're worried, you can phone in. Go on,' and the nurse leant over the bed, whispering, wrinkling her nose like a pig, 'treat yourself, Mrs Jericho. Go shopping, just for a bit, there's some good shops in the middle of town. You'll wear yourself ragged, sitting here and fretting all day long. When Steven wakes up, he doesn't want to see his mum all worn out now, does he?'

Mrs Jericho's smile faded and she did not reply. Instead, she turned her face to Steven's and stroked his thin, blue veined arm, to avoid the nurse's attentions; she appreciated the thought but disliked the girl's intimate tone.

Mrs Jericho had seen too many nurses to expend energy on all of them, except to pity them. Nurses had no choice but to spend every day in the company of doctors, and doctors were idiots, doctors were people who took home vast sums of money for prying into their patients' lives, rooting out every secret, every failure, and doing nothing to help.

Nevertheless, although Mrs Jericho said nothing, this particular nurse had a point. Shopping was an excellent idea. The family had only arrived on Sunday morning – the call from the Frei Institute to travel up north for new treatments had been unexpected and unsought, and Mrs Jericho had packed 69

quickly while her husband had booked yet more compassionate leave from work. Thomas Lambert had arranged everything, of course. He had secured lists of houses to rent, details of transport, postal redirection and even a Sunday meal ready and prepared because domestic staff could not be hired until Monday morning. Thomas was the Jerichos' personal miracle worker, but then, Thomas was well paid. So now, Mrs Jericho found herself living in a new city for God knows how long, and the nurse was right. It was time to shop. Not ordinary shopping – Thomas could arrange someone to do that, or do it himself – but one of her special expeditions: her revenge on shops and shopkeepers and shopgirls everywhere. They deserved it, because of how she had suffered at their hands, twenty-four years ago.

When Mrs Jericho was sixteen, the mockery of her peers had become an insufferable pressure. Reluctantly, in an effort to join in and become one of the crowd, she had latched on to Sally Hunt's gang.

The members of this elite were schoolgirls in name only. They led sophisticated, exciting, gossipy lives which both repulsed and excited the young Eva Dalloway. Sally Hunt and her friends would use exeats to travel to London for the weekend, there to go drinking and worse, returning with tales of illicit liaisons in expensive hotels.

On Sunday nights, the girls would thrill the dormitory with descriptions of anonymous, hurried lovers. No doubt these men were fictional, Mrs Jericho thought now, but at the time they had seemed decadent and frightening and mature.

Young Eva began to skulk around the edges of the group, hoping to be touched by their glamour – or at least hoping that by becoming part of Sally Hunt's audience, she would escape their scorn. For a while Sally had seemed tolerant, almost friendly, but she was just biding her time. One Saturday, Eva, Sally and Sally's disciples had signed out of school and gone to the village.

There, Sally had issued her challenge and changed the course of Eva's life.

She had, in a way which Mrs Jericho perceived many years later, damned Eva to sit at the bedside of her dying son. It had seemed straightforward at the time. Sally had her eye on a velvet shirt which cost ten pounds, and she announced that if that uptight little prig Eva Dalloway was so determined to be one of the gang then she should steal it on Sally's behalf.

Eva was caught walking out of the shop with the shirt concealed beneath her jumper. The shopkeeper – long-since enraged by thieving little rich girls from the school on the hill – pressed charges. Eva's father was a tower of shame. She had never seen this quiet, modest, plump man cry with anger before. He refused to pay for a solicitor to defend his daughter. She had pleaded guilty, was found guilty and a criminal record was entered under her name.

After that incident and as soon as school was behind her, Eva Dalloway 70

moved swiftly and determinedly into circles which even Sally Hunt would have envied, but the criminal record followed her, a secret cancer dogging her life even as her surname changed from Dalloway to Jericho. On the day she married Alfred, it occurred to her that her name was changing at last, that the criminal Eva Dalloway ceased to exist in the moment she uttered her wedding vows; but a deeper part

of her consciousness knew that the law was clever and cruel and unflagging in its persistence. Even as she signed the church register, similar amendments were being made to her charge sheet and Mrs Eva Jericho would still be persecuted by the years-old conviction. For all her fears, none of this had mattered. She would contain the cancer, it could not be as strong as her, though it had haunted even her pregnancy with small shows of blood every morning, a reminder that something dark and vile still gnawed inside her. Then in the spring of 1974 the shop-lifting charge had returned to full view, vigorous and sharp after its years of sleeping. The single offence had set into motion the chain of events which now brought Mrs Jericho to the cold, clean walls and antiseptic smell of the Frei Institute.

Still, Mrs Jericho had contained her rage and when Steven was born she had new agonies to deal with. Perhaps she would have forgotten her hatred of shopkeepers, but then the Voice had come.

Mrs Jericho slowly became aware of the Voice when she would lie awake in bed worrying over Steven's future. At first, it seemed nothing more than a faint, distant thudding, a double-thump repeated over and over again. For a time, Mrs Jericho even thought that she had become horribly aware of her own heartbeat. But as she listened over the weeks and months and years, the pulse had resolved itself into words. It became the Voice. The Voice softly hammered certain words, the words changing each time, depending on whatever possessed Mrs Jericho's mind that night. The Voice's one consistency was that it would speak in only two syllables so that its rhythm was maintained always, a military discipline which caused Mrs Jericho to give the Voice some respect. If Steven had been suffering from some new treatment, the Voice would say *sick boy, sick boy, sick boy*; when she dared to think of her schooldays, the refrain would go *Sal Hunt, Sal Hunt, Sal Hunt*, or *shop lift, shop lift, shop lift*, on and on until Mrs Jericho fell into wretched sleep. Gradually the Voice left the constraints of night and walked with Mrs Jericho in daylight –

not all the time, just at certain moments when Mrs Jericho dared to relax.

The moment she forgot Steven's troubles – whenever she braved a smile, it seemed the Voice would emerge, a metronome deep inside her body thudding out an insistent new phrase.

The special shopping expeditions had been born from the Voice's persistence. One cold, spring morning, Mrs Jericho had been shopping for a new dress to wear to one of Alfred's functions. Stripped to her

underwear in the 71

changing room, Mrs Jericho stopped, staring into space as the Voice emerged.

She held the dress to her face, caressing her cheek with crushed velvet, and the Voice thudded with fierce resolve, hammering the words in her ears: *Do it, do it, do it.*

Mrs Jericho bought the dress, took it home and followed the Voice's instructions. She perceived for the first time that the Voice was a friend, not a tormentor, as it urged her to do things, frightening things, exciting things.

Afterwards, she thought that this had been the finest shopping trip of her life.

Such satisfaction could not be denied. The excursions became part of her routine.

The routine was this: every so often, when the Voice demanded it, she would set out by taxi, early morning, and by four in the afternoon she would return home laden down with bags, the Voice thudding *oh yes, oh yes, oh yes*. Then the real pleasure of shopping would begin. She would go to the bedroom alone and unwrap each new delicacy. The last time, in May, it had been a Prince-of-Wales-check jacket from Chanel, an aquamarine silk suit from St Laurent and – a little daring, this – a bold, chunky wraparound tweed coat from Vivienne Westwood. This last item was far too young and experimental for Mrs Jericho to wear, of course, but the clothes from her special expeditions were not for wearing.

She would lie each garment out on the bed, step back, and then a whole hour could pass in silence while Mrs Jericho did nothing but stare in admiration. She took pleasure in resisting the Voice's plea: *do it, do it, do it, go on, go on, go on.* Then she got the scissors out. Carefully and slowly, rubbing her tongue raw against her top teeth in concentration, she would attack the clothes, unpicking a pocket here, a hem line there, and sometimes when the fever got too much she would lash out, slashing a lining or a sleeve or a crotch in half. The scissors would jab and glint and make that oh-so-satisfying scissor sound while Mrs Jericho revelled in the discomfort of sweat coursing down her back, channelling its way to the hot, sticky patch between her legs.

In her exhilaration, the Voice lost its resolution, merging into the roar

of blood in her head.

Then, once her work was done and the Voice was finally quiet, Mrs Jericho would shower. She would leave the ragged tangle of destroyed clothing on the bed while she dried herself, dressed and applied make-up. Only then would she return to her purchases, picking them up with the tips of her fingers and holding them at a distance as if the fabric were diseased. Each item of clothing would be returned to its parent bag, the receipt tucked alongside.

The final step of the procedure would come a week later, when Mrs Jericho returned to town, taking every single purchase back. 'Damaged goods,' she would say, holding the ripped clothing out for the sales girl to see. This was 72

her favourite moment. She would challenge the girl with her stare, a stare that said, do you *dare* argue? They never did; she had not been refused once.

They always gave her money back. There had been difficulties, certainly. Mrs Jericho had lost count of the times that a sly, uneducated shopgirl – and they were always girls, they had to be, Mrs Jericho made sure of that – would refer the matter to her superior, and once, the floor manager of Harvey Nichols had been summoned, but Mrs Jericho beat them, every delicious time. Of course, certain things counted in her favour – her credentials, her reputation and her wealth. The Jerichos banked with Hoare and Company, who supplied cheque books with a sheet of blotting paper at the front and credit card holders with rolled gold edges. However, Mrs Jericho liked to think that, ultimately, the victory was brought about by her stare alone. She would fix each challenger with magnificent disdain, supported by the Voice's victory chant of her own name, *E va, E va, E va.* As her money was handed back, Mrs Jericho was revenged upon Sally Hunt and the shopkeepers of the land. The Voice had shown her the way.

Now, as she stroked her son's arm – and a thin, dry patch of skin detached itself from his arm as she did so – Mrs Jericho thought, yes, time to go shopping. My little treat.

A second nurse approached the bed, nodded at Mrs Jericho – she almost curtsied – then leant down to whisper in the first nurse's ear, 'You head off now, Monica, I'll take over.'

The first nurse hesitated and looked at Mrs Jericho with wary eyes,

then whispered back, ‘I’m supposed to be on till six.’ Then both women looked at Steven’s mother, automatically expecting her to make the final decision.

Their two moon faces, eyebrows raised in the begging of permission, almost made Mrs Jericho laugh, and she nodded. Monica stood up to go, whispered,

‘Thanks, Jen. I’m back in for second shift, I’ll bring us a McChicken sandwich for tea. We can shove it in the microwave.’ As she said the words, Mrs Jericho could have said them with her. She felt that peculiar dull click inside the top of her head, a mute relative of the Voice, and she thought as she so often thought:

I knew she was going to say that.

She stayed silent as the nurses exchanged duties. Mrs Jericho idly rolled the strip of Steven’s skin between thumb and forefinger, making a thin, fleshy cigarette which she flicked into the bin.

Less and less of him every day, she thought, not long now till he’s nothing but bits and scraps, scattered between bins and test-tubes and dusty corners.

She had read once that the black grime on the London Underground was composed of flakes of human skin, and she saw her son disappearing in the same way, desiccated to death.

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Mrs Jericho was aware that the prolonged silence was making the second nurse uneasy. She was young and awkward and imagined that visitors only came to bedsides to talk, so eventually she said, ‘Dr Greco’s quite pleased with the results. I heard Sister saying. And he’s very good, Dr Greco. Bit of luck, it won’t be long till Steven’s better.’

Mrs Jericho turned to the nurse and spoke her first full sentence of the day.

‘I don’t just want my son better; I want him perfect.’

The nurse fell silent, suddenly fascinated by her shoes. It had been some minutes since Mrs Jericho had thought of her hair, so she tipped her head right back, then jerked it forward so that the symmetrical bob shot into its correct position. Satisfied, she listened to the Voice. Today, its words were a sad lullaby for the unconscious Steven: *dy ing,*

dy ing, dy ing.

Five o'clock in the morning is a time when even the strongest and happi-est might be tormented by the past, and Mrs Jericho had more than her fair share of ghosts; pale spectres of Sally Hunt and an angry shopkeeper and a social worker who had decided in 1974 that a shoplifting charge was not to be forgotten. Combined with the sight of her son rotting in anticipation of death, these things might have driven Mrs Jericho mad. Only the Voice kept her sane. Despite its brutal words, it had become her constant companion and her only friend.

The nurse heard nothing but the ventilator hissing then hissing again.

The Doctor, Roz and Chris picked their way through the skeleton of flat 11.

The promise of daylight outside was not enough to penetrate the fire-black cave, so they trod carefully. The floor was a thin marsh of water and soot and more water dribbled from the ceiling. Roz and Chris prodded things and lifted the odd timber, not sure what they were looking for, while Roz continued the discussion she had started earlier. 'We've seen enough of psi-powers lately to know they can have both natural and artificial origins we've even seen it spread as a virus. Gabriel could have been born with his Glamour, or he could have been given it. Maybe against his will, when his mother was pregnant.'

'You're paranoid, Roz,' said Chris. 'Psi-powers always give you the creeps.

All this from a few scars?'

'You didn't see them,' said Roz. 'The scars on Winnie Tyler's arm didn't correspond to any medical condition, and I can't think what sort of accident might have caused them. They could be the result of a series of injections.'

'Under her arms?' said Chris. 'Funny place for an injection.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Roz, exasperated, wondering why the Doctor did not join in. 'Could be tissue samples, a reaction to drugs, anything. It isn't proof, not yet, but we should keep it in mind. Mrs Tyler might not have a psychic child by chance.'

‘Why would someone experiment on her?’ said Chris and he grimaced.

‘The Tylers are poor,’ said Roz. ‘Winnie’s got three kids, and that must cost.

If someone offers you ten quid per injection for twenty injections, you aren’t going to turn the money down.’

‘Maybe,’ said Chris, ‘but if you’re pregnant – or they want to inject your kid – they could offer all the money in the world and you’d still say no.’

‘In theory. But that’s all we’ve got, theory. None of us is a parent, so what do we know? If risking one kid buys food for the other two, you’d do it. There were children on Yemaya 4, and Dione-Kisumu didn’t care. All I’m saying is, if you’re looking for guinea-pigs, this is a good place to –’

The Doctor shushed them. He seemed to have found what he was looking for, though Roz and Chris could see nothing. He stood near the window, where the hardboard coverings had burnt and warped. He stared at the wreckage around him – crisped carpet tiles, a chair and a supporting bracket from the roof. ‘This is where he was standing,’ he said.

‘Who?’ asked Chris.

‘Whoever was in here.’

‘How can you tell?’

In reply, the Doctor gave the chair a kick. It flew into its constituent parts but as it did so, the air flickered. Thin, jagged lines of bluish-white light danced across the ashes, scattered into the air and vanished; the illumination had lasted no more than a second. Residual energy, Doctor, rubbing his hand across his mouth.

‘Of what?’ said Roz.

‘Tribophysics.’ The Doctor uttered the word as though it should strike fear into Roz and Chris, then he fell silent. He stepped his way through the flat, heading for the courtyard as though keen to be free of the building. As Roz and Chris followed, the Doctor spoke again, though he avoided their eyes.

‘Remember I said things might be worse than I thought? Well, they

are. Very much worse. Something has found its way to Earth and it's older and more dangerous than I thought possible.'

'Again?' said Chris, with no sarcasm.

The Doctor squinted into the rising sun and saluted a single magpie perched on the Quadrant's roof. Then he drew a deep breath and exhaled, shaking off the last of the long night's shadow. He said briskly, 'Roz, get me a car. Chris, get me some cocaine.'

Half an hour later, Jack Leather woke up cursing and spitting, it was unusual for the Leathers to sleep at night – in normal circumstances they kept their kitchen window operation running until dawn, taking money off the girls and giving directions to the next client – but tonight they had closed up shop, 75

because of the police presence. After a few hours' sleep, Jack had heard a sound from the front room. A fizzing, then a bump. Jumping into his old, brown corduroys, Jack charged out of the bedroom, relishing the thought of a fight. He had lost money tonight and could take out his frustration on the burglar. It had been weeks since he'd had the pleasure of giving someone a good kicking.

The Capper was waiting for him, sitting in the armchair like a gentleman caller awaiting a cup of tea.

Hymns have been sung to honour the wonders and glories of the human mind, but that same mind can be a small and stupid thing. Certainly, this was the case with Jack Leather. He saw the Capper clearly in the first light of dawn. The Capper's new white skin seemed sewn together and it was beginning to putrefy. Under the Capper's hair, strange things moved, blind metal worms searching for sunlight. His right arm seemed to have split into two limbs, one flesh, one white plastic, and a light blazed at the back of his throat, silhouetting the Capper's teeth into a dental portcullis. For all this, with a magnificent lack of imagination, Jack Leather said only, 'Well, Capper.

Nice to see you.' Reason did not flee from Jack's mind. He saw what he saw, as simple as that. He had seen worse. Something had happened to the Capper, that was obvious, but it was no concern of Jack's, and if this mutilation was some sort of gangland ritual – well, Jack himself had carved up men's faces in far worse patterns. And if the Capper was putting on a show to scare Jack, then he underestimated his neighbour.

A more important factor ticked away in Jack's mind. A meeting with

the Capper meant business and business meant money. They had dealt with each other occasionally over the years, but kept a distance. The Capper had established his niche as a drugs baron, and the Leathers didn't dare intrude on that territory. They stuck to prostitution, With maybe a little heroin passing from girl to client, but what the hell, consider it an advertisement for the Capper's trade. Once in a while, though, the Leathers and the Capper had done each other favours. 'Dogs from the same kennel,' Jack would say. Now, it seemed, was such a time.

The Capper said nothing. He only hissed and Jack wondered if he had farted. Jack kicked a pizza box out of the way, found his cigarettes and sat opposite his visitor. Irene came out of the bedroom and stopped. She pushed back her hair as she looked at the Capper, wondering what to say, but she had lived so long and done so much with Jack that their reactions had become identical. Their minds had shrunk to a similar size. She took a swig from a nearby beer can, then said, 'For Christ's sake, Jack, your fly's undone.'

Jack groped his crotch and found the rusty zip, laughing as he did so. 'So, Capper. It worked, then.'

The Capper inclined his head, a quizzical gesture.

'The face,' said Jack. 'Set yourself on fire and get made white in compensa-tion. Clever trick.'

'NHS job?' asked Irene, with a cackle. 'I'd sue 'em.'

The Capper spoke: 'I need –' He stopped, shook his head. A wet rope of skin detached from the neck and slapped against the wall. Irene looked pissed off, knowing she'd be the one to mop that up. Then he continued, the words halting, almost mechanical. 'Your help. My associates. Let me down.'

'We noticed,' said Jack.

Jack reached for an open bottle of Thunderbird. He drank the wine and Irene sipped her beer, at leisure as the Capper explained his story. It took a while, and the Leathers became impatient, finishing his sentences for him. The Capper seemed to have difficulty finding his voice. Sometimes it squeaked like a choirboy's falsetto, sometimes it lowered into the deep rumble of ancient engines. But gradually, the original Capper's voice emerged, the bragging wide-boy tone

underscored by the giggle of a child, with a consciously wide vocabulary – 'Beware the self-educated,' Irene always said. He explained that he had been betrayed by his partners. At the beginning of July, the Capper had taken delivery of a fresh consignment of pure cocaine from London. He sampled the coke himself and a brilliant idea had exploded inside his head, a new marketing technique. The coke would be sold at rock-bottom prices, five quid a gram, taking cocaine out of the realm of the privileged and on to the streets.

'Five quid?' gasped Jack. 'You're bloody mad, that's giving it away. Blimey, I'd have bought some. I heard there was stuff going for a fiver, I thought it was talcum. You're a nutter, Cap.'

The Capper explained that his partners had complained also, but they followed his instructions until the 'unfortunate incident'.

'You mean the day you torched yourself?' interrupted Irene, scratching her armpit.

'A mistake,' said the Capper with a grin, and Irene told him to shut his teeth or she would need sunglasses. Then the Capper explained that after his 'death' – he chuckled, and the Leathers joined in – his partners had taken advantage. They had taken the cocaine and returned it to the standard price.

'They're selling the stuff and it's spreading across the city, but not fast enough,' said the Capper, sitting forward with what could have been excitement. Jack was sure he saw the torso separate from the hip, but never mind.

'I want everyone to try it. Kids and teachers and bankers, housewives and policemen and old women, all of them. Taste it and you'll taste heaven.' He rubbed his hands with glee, strands of flesh welding the two palms together.

Jack and Irene noticed that if the Capper they had met ten minutes ago had 77

been below-par, he was now his old self again. The Capper himself seemed to realize this, rejoicing in his restoration.

'So where do we come in?' said Jack.

'My partners think they've got all the cocaine. They're wrong. I've been trying to negotiate with them since Saturday but for some reason, they aren't keen. They don't think I'm quite myself.' The

Capper lifted both hands in a Gallic shrug. His left little finger came off and fell into his lap. The lap squirmed and a metal finger poked through the trouser's fabric, claiming the finger and carrying it back to the groin like a mother hen gathering its brood.

Jack would have bet good money that the Capper's surgeons were Japanese.

Clever sods, the Japs. The Capper continued, 'There's coke in the lock-up on Crimea Street. You'll have to break it open, I don't know where the keys are.

I've got this habit of losing things, these days.' He giggled, exactly like the Capper of old. Irene wondered if it was worth the walk to the kitchen for another can.

'And. . . ?' said Jack, tired and a little bored.

'And it's yours,' said the Capper. 'Sell it for a fiver a gram, sell it quick.

You've got a handy network of girls and boys spread across the entire city and all their clients have got money. Your staff can try the stuff themselves. Keep

'em sweet, perk of the job. Tell them they can take it to school, flog it there.'

'It's the holidays,' said Irene.

'Oh,' said the Capper, peeved. 'Anyway. New markets, Jack, new markets.'

Jack shifted in his chair, genuinely troubled at last. 'Your partners aren't gonna like that. They've already bombed your flat, what'll they do to us?'

'Nothing,' said the Capper. His grin was impossibly wide, splitting his cheeks to the jawbone. 'I'll take care of them, I promise. Oh yes, I promise you that.'

'What's in it for us?' asked Irene, searching the ashtray for a smokeable butt. 'What's your cut, Capper?'

'Nothing again,' the Capper replied. 'The money's yours. My little gift.'

The deal was done. Jack suspected the Capper's motives, but if the

cocaine was cut with something – powdered dog-worming pills were the latest trick –

then they could test it on the girls first. Even at a fiver a gram, the Leathers could make a tidy sum by next weekend. Jack went to shake on it but changed his mind, seeing the melted cheese of the Capper's hands.

'Thank you,' said the Capper. 'I knew we could do business. We're not so different, you and I' Then he disappeared. Curls of bluish-white light flickered around his body, streaming into his eyes; the air seemed to bend and fold around the Capper until the chair was empty.

Jack and Irene sat in silence for a good minute. Jack stroked his thin, greasy moustache, wondering if they were about to enter into something a little too 78

dangerous, a little too high-profile for his liking. Then he thought of the money and smiled. He would deal with the Devil himself for cash in hand.

'Well,' said Irene, 'I'll put the kettle on.'

The Capper tumbled back into the void with all its alarm systems screeching a warning. Something was going wrong with the interface. Simon Jenkins aka the Capper aka the Host was meant to be nothing more than a vessel, but his personality was now reasserting itself, expanding and filling the machine's empty Processors. This was not meant to happen, but the downloading of the central artificial intelligence allowed it. Emergency routines alone were not enough to keep the creature active for long and without a controlling core, it would enter shutdown.

Shutdown was inconceivable. The fact that the reactivation signal had been sent meant that the War was still being waged. The creature knew that it had been sabotaged during the Sleeping. The Enemy must have faked entry codes to transfer the intelligence to the Homeworld, hoping to deactivate the war machine permanently, but it was created with rare skill. The backups were clever enough to translate the call to arms into action.

Now, a substantial part of the core cried out that the Host was becoming too strong, creating its own agenda, but the majority of artificial synapses would not let go. They kissed and stitched the Capper's brain with approximated affection. Memory circuits remembered the intelligence it had once possessed and simulated

regret at the loss of such a dynamic, resourceful – even witty –

mind, and those circuits made the synapses cling to the Host, a poor substitute, but a substitute nonetheless. So for the moment, the Capper's agenda would be executed. Until the cocaine had reached maximum circulation, the machine should have done no more than wait. Instead, it would do what the Capper wanted. The alarms were shut down, with one consoling thought: the master Imperative still backed every function and would take control when the time was right, when the psychics signalled their doom. Then the Capper could be junked. In the meantime the circuits which had tapped into and grown fond of the Capper's emotions thought that a little revenge might be an amusing diversion.

. The Capper-hybrid continued through the void knowing that things were wrong but certain that it would cope. Archive banks recalled feats of heroism in the wars of every recorded civilization – soldiers who would carry on fighting after losing their legs, crippled starships performing suicide dives, entire planets that would burn rather than surrender. If the machine became one of the walking wounded, then it was part of a great tradition. The War would continue, the War would be won.

The Capper's torso expanded into a mass of metal tentacles which arced 79

through the void to connect with the machine's true form. The Capper acted as its anchor into the primary three-dimensional world – the tip of its iceberg and the anchor could now be withdrawn and tucked into the parent while strategies were formulated. The still-humanoid shape of the Capper became a tiny speck against the machine's hull.

If it were possible to have an aerial view of a separate dimension, the Capper would be seen disappearing below the surface of a construct equivalent in size to three Cities of London; a construct which, if everything went as planned, would soon itself emerge into three-dimensional space at coordinates corresponding to England, Earth, 1987.

At six o'clock the Doctor returned alone to Angel Square and stepped into the TARDIS. He remained inside for ten minutes, then emerged with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

Behind him, the TARDIS shuddered and disappeared.

Chapter 6

When Monday morning proper arrived, Gabriel Tyler dressed at nine o'clock, ate his Sugar Puffs and watched *Why Don't You. . . ?* with Bev and Carl, who were both still in their bedtime T-shirts. Then he looked his mother in the eye and told her he was going out and wouldn't be long. Mum was always cautious about his wanderings and would do her best to ensure that he stayed within her eyesight, but once or twice a day – especially a day like this, when her face was bleary and an empty bottle of red wine stood next to the swing-bin Gabriel could use his special eye-to-eye charm. His look would placate Mum and stop her questions, and he could wander off. Gabriel was careful with the charm. He did not understand how it worked, and sometimes wondered why Bev and Carl and his mates could not do the same. He also feared that it would weaken with over-use so he summoned it sparingly. Today, though, was important and warranted the harmless spell. Today, Gabriel was going to see the Wide World.

As usual, he had slept little in the night. The fire at flat 11 was not, in Gabriel's opinion, all that extraordinary, not compared to Sylvie Harvey's death nineteen months ago. Sylvie dropped dead in her front room on New Year's Eve, a strangely quiet exit for such a loud, demonstrative woman.

Gabriel found the Quadrant's reactions electrifying. People stood outside their flats and wept openly. Mrs Skinner, Mrs Thomas and old Mrs Hearn keened like animals. Gabriel felt sad himself, and those women seized upon this. Each in turn sought him out, took him from his mother's arms and cradled him as though he could take their pain away.

These moments of crisis made Gabriel feet special and important, and he treasured them. There had been some of that behaviour last night, but not as much as Gabriel, would have liked. No one could care for the Capper's flat in the way that they loved the late Mrs Harvey, so Gabriel had been returned to his bed rather disappointed.

For many hours he had maintained his vigil over the sleeping Quadrant, noting at five o'clock that the new people from flat 43 crept across to the Capper's on a secret mission of their own. They were interesting, these newcomers. To Gabriel, they *smelt* different, and he resolved to look one of them in the eye the first chance he got.

Soon after, Gabriel had picked up his pencil and paper, and his hand moved 81

across the paper's surface. Since Saturday, he had been drawing the same thing over and over again, but new details were added each time. He looked away from the paper, his hand moving of its own accord. When he did look down, he giggled. The pencil had sketched out faces. One face in particular recurred, a crude oval overlapping itself until it fell off the margin. It was the Witch again, now with fierce, staring eyes. The other drawing repeated itself also, the one he had drawn for years. Gabriel didn't know why it came to him.

He didn't even *like* noughts-and-crosses. And every time he sketched it, some instinct told him to leave the grid empty, no noughts and no crosses.

Still smiling, Gabriel laid out the drawings side by side, then retrieved yesterday's from under the bed. He filled the floor with paper then sat on his bed, legs crossed like a little Buddha. He looked at the drawings, then he looked away, then he looked back, until he heard Mum stirring from her chair.

Quickly, he shoved the papers back under his bed lest they be found. He did not need to study them any longer because they were now fixed in his head and would not rest.

They were beginning to make sense; not an ordinary sense which would point out beginning, middle and end, but a massive, complicated sense, much in the same way that people might claim to understand God, something which passes beyond words. Gabriel felt excited and without knowing why, he knew that he had to go out.

Gabriel walked out of the Quadrant, turned left and headed for town. He knew he didn't have long. The spell he had cast on Mum would only last an hour, maybe less, and then she would notice his absence. As usual, she would panic and call the police, fearing that her son had fallen into the hands of the thieves and murderers outside. However, when Gabriel trotted down Exeter Street and reached the flyover, he could go no further. To one side, an entire stretch of land had been fenced off, where demolition on the Hamlets housing blocks had begun, and ahead, the underpass leading to the traffic island had been sealed after one too many muggings. The only path forward lay to the left, but it meant walking through the Baxter estate. Gabriel wasn't stupid enough to do that on his own. Summer made the estate worse, even this early in the morning. The gangs would be out, looking for trouble, their brains baked by the season's beat. Halted in his tracks, Gabriel climbed on top of a low wall and looked at the city. He half-closed his eyes and opened his arms wide as though breathing in the

vista.

Gabriel Tyler had little time for reading. He preferred his own stories, grim tales which ended in spectacular death and disaster, but an image from *The Wind in the Willows* had settled into his memory. He scorned the riverbankers'

fears of the Wild Wood – woods were supposed to be wild; scary places were designed for children to visit – but Gabriel always remembered Ratty's warn-82

ing of the Wide World beyond, a place the rat would not even discuss. Now, Gabriel held the Wide World in his grasp and longed to enter it.

The flyover loomed above, straddling the estate with wide concrete legs, the entire structure resonating with the roar of traffic, strangers driving to destinations unknown. In the distance, the blue-glass and red-brick towers of the city reflected the morning sun, and far off lay the moors, rising above the city's straight lines, all detail obscured in a pale haze. It was the moors which seemed to summon Gabriel, tempting him with the Wide World's wonders.

The nine year-old boy had neither the age nor the inclination to be romantic, but he felt the tug of the landscape as something physical, a knot in his stomach. It called to him, beckoning with the promise of open land where he could run and sing to the vault of blue sky above. All these things were promised and all these things were denied; despite his gifts, Gabriel was a little boy, lacking the skills to carry him to that distant land.

He turned his back on the moors and walked back to the Quadrant, frustrated. He hummed the *Why Don't You. . . ?* theme tune – the old one, not the new version they had introduced this year – but his mind kept ticking over.

He had not yet given up. When he entered the courtyard, the solution came to him, opening in his head like a pop-up book. It would require a single lie –

not a charm but something simpler and longer-lasting, an ordinary child's fib. Also it would require something more difficult and possibly dangerous, but which had to be done for Gabriel to get what he wanted. Much happier, Gabriel changed his path, grinning at the thought of an exciting day ahead.

Above Gabriel, in flat 28, Monday morning brought blessed relief to

Harry Harvey. The madness had passed. He awoke on his bare mattress and a blissful ten seconds passed before the pain awoke also. Harry thought that pain was good, pain reminded him of his trials and his survival. If this pain never went, then that was only right. It told him of the filth he had embraced and it forbade that Harry should ever return to Smithfield Cemetery or any similar place. Harry knew that he had been purged of his nocturnal forages and he would never again answer the call of his shameful, perverted lust. He actually hoped that the pain would remain for the rest of his life, so that he would not stray, would now become the decent, ordinary man everyone considered him to be. The actual events of Saturday night were lost in confusion. In leaving, the madness had taken the memory with it, except for dark, blood-edged images which Harry glimpsed from the corner of his eye, but again, he thought that this was no more than he deserved; shadows at either side would keep him on the straight and narrow. All in all, thought Harry, I'm a lucky man.

Of course, he could not go to work – his balance went as soon as he stood up, as though a thick, cold stew lurched inside his skull. Nevertheless, he 83

was hungry, desperately so, his guts clenching and unclenching. Harry had to dress in case David was in the front room. Not looking at the stitches –

but feeling them, Jesus, he could feel them he slipped on a vest. He then had to sit for a good few minutes to get his breath back. The vest scratched against his handiwork and pressed upon the wound, and the pain swelled to the extent that Harry thought he was going to faint. The wash of fever passed, then returned when Harry put on his shirt. He then forced himself to endure the process for a third time as he put on a second shirt – he needed as many layers as he could bear, convinced that the stitches would stand proud through the material, betraying his secret to all who looked. Finally, Harry buttoned up a cardigan and the pain seemed to expand beyond his body, pain the size and weight of a cliff-face. Harry carried this before him as his due and proper punishment, as he opened the bedroom door and stepped into the front room.

'Jesus Christ, Harry, you look like death.'

David Daniels, still in his boxer shorts, was sprawled across the settee watching the five past ten showing of *Neighbours*, but now he sat up and stared at Harry with genuine concern. Panicked, Harry looked down at his chest, thinking, it's bleeding he can see the blood he'll

know what I've done.

There was no blood and no sign of the injury. Harry heard his own voice saying, 'I'm not very well, that's all.' It was the first time he had spoken aloud in thirty-four hours and his voice was the croak of some dead, dry creature.

He coughed, swallowed the saliva in case it contained tell-tale blood, then spoke again: 'I need to phone work.'

Breathing hard, Harry made it to the phone. He dialled the garage and to his own surprise he made a reasonably coherent excuse about summer flu. As he returned the phone to its cradle, Harry knew that David was still watching him. And wearing nothing, thought Harry, dirty little bastard, he's doing it on purpose. But look at him, Harry, look at his skin. Did you once find such things attractive? That pale, smooth curve of flesh, there, on the chest. You've seen how easily skin cuts, Harry, you've seen it open and blossom into blood.

Skin's weak, Harry, it betrays you, it carries your scars like an open book.

'Harry?' said David, and Harry realized that he had been staring at David's body. David didn't seem to notice, saying cautiously, 'Maybe you should phone the doctor. I'll call him. That doesn't look like flu.' David stood up. Harry couldn't help it; years of repressed instinct dragged his eyes to the shift of weight at the front of David's shorts, then to the long, white expanse of thigh beneath. In that moment, things became much clearer to Harry Harvey. The boy in front of him was his final test. He had never been attracted to David – 'Don't piss on your own patch,' said the foreman at work – but David nonetheless represented all that Harry might desire, the same desire which had plunged him into the weekend's abyss. If he could resist the boy, then the 84

rest of his life would be clean.

Harry took delight in his severity and the sudden strength of his voice.

'It's none of your business. You're a guest in this house. What I say, what I do' – Harry paused as he struggled for breath, leaning against the chair, then continued, sure that David had not seen him falter – 'it's nothing to do with you. This is my flat. My home.'

David replied in a peeved tone, as though this were an ordinary domestic row, 'Harry, don't start that, you look sick, that's all –'

‘Filth,’ roared Harry, flooded with new strength, and he enjoyed David’s comic blink of surprise. ‘You’re filth. Queer filth. Rutting in the sewer. Fetching the dirt back here. I want you out.’ Harry lurched towards his lodger, invigorated by the power of his words. At last he was saying all the things he had wanted to say since Sylvie died. He was aware of spit dribbling down his chin – and surely the floor shouldn’t be tilting like this? – but now the dam was open and no man could stop the torrent of words. ‘Get out of my house.

Go to your own kind. You’re infecting me, it’s your fault. Leave my life alone.

Get out. ’

Harry thought the speech wonderful and strong, and it annoyed him that David did not flinch; he only stared at Harry in puzzlement and said quietly,

‘Harry, love. What’s wrong? What’s happened to you? Look, I’ll phone the doctor –’

David went for the phone, but Harry staggered across the room, reached the phone first and pulled it out of the socket. At last, fear crossed David’s face. Pretty little face, came a whisper at the back of Harry’s mind, pretty and white and smooth, bet it cuts easily, try cutting it, Harry, watch it bleed, that’s what skin’s for, isn’t it?

For a moment, Harry weighed the phone in his hand, testing it as a weapon, and David came close, talking softly. The rush of blood in Harry’s head swamped David’s words, but he could guess the boy’s intent: seduction. Just look, Harry, look at the glint of spit on his lower lip, look at the white teeth in the pretty mouth. The mouth wants to kiss you, Harry, stop him, stop the filth before he’s kissing you.

Harry lifted the phone above his head. Then his strength deserted him. The phone fell to the floor and Harry’s arm hung limp and useless at his side. Only then did Harry realize that he was crying. Ashamed of his weakness, he could only whimper at David to leave him alone. David looked at him for a long time. Perhaps he spoke, Harry wasn’t sure, before shucking on his jeans –

don’t look, Harry, don’t look – then a T-shirt. He picked up his trainers and went to the door, his face sulky. Harry did manage to hear David’s parting statement. ‘When I come back, Harry, we’ll pretend this didn’t happen. Now you get some sleep. If you’re not better by this evening,

whether you like it or not.'

The door slammed shut and Harry's temptation was gone. He fell into the chair and sobbed. He cried for a full ten minutes, until no more tears would come. He had passed the test superbly, he had proved that he was better than David's kind, but he felt no sense of victory. He felt lonely.

Slowly, as he sat with only the television's chatter for company, he realized that madness and memory had taken one other thing with them: the ghost of Sylvie Harvey. She whispered in his ear no longer, and Harry missed her more now than ever before. Desolate, he looked at the empty room, at the very spot where he had witnessed the last, awful minutes of her life.

Sylvie Harvey died on New Year's Eve 1985, and even as people lamented her death, they said that she had died in splendour. Sylvie's workplace, the paint factory, had organized a special party to welcome in 1986, not the usual disco or dinner-dance but a Ball, the only Ball to which the Harveys had ever been invited. And Sylvie being Sylvie, she had gone all-out to make this a night to remember. At great cost, she had hired a stunning, full-length jade-green taffeta ball gown, and borrowed her mother's genuine diamond necklace. To Harry, she looked like a Queen, even if she did undermine the image by running around the flat with a cigarette in her mouth, laughing that she looked like a tart. She never took anything seriously. The day before, she had tested the dress in David's company and they had acted out scenes from Dynasty, both screaming with laughter as Sylvie improvised a cigarette holder from a toilet roll.

Of course, Sylvie was running late. Fully dressed, she still had two curlers hanging down, banging against her forehead, when the others arrived. Sylvie and the girls from work had organized a minibus to take them to the Ball, 'So we can get pissed as farts and sing all the way home,' said Sylvie. At eight-fifteen, the minibus had pulled up outside and beeped. Sylvie, in a customary panic, shoved a six-pack into Harry's hand and told him to go out and keep the bus happy. She'd be ten minutes, promise.

Harry, smug and jaunty in black tie, went out to chat and laugh with the minibus passengers, all of them pretending that they did this sort of thing every day. And if truth be told – Harry tried to forget this bit, but today he saw everything that had happened in plain and cruel

light – he lingered outside a little longer than he should have done. The bus driver was red-haired and Irish and smiling, and for once Harry was on good form. The young man accepted a beer and laughed heartily at his exaggerated description of Sylvie's fluster.

Left alone, Sylvie succumbed to a violent asthma attack. From the mess, the police guessed afterwards that the attack had started in the bedroom. The drawers had been flung across the room and the inhaler found there had been empty. It seemed that Sylvie had then wasted time hunting down her spare 86

inhaler in the kitchen, then the front room. The phone had been dislodged.

Perhaps Sylvie had tried to use it, but could no longer speak. Finally, she fell into the cradle of her Christmas web, pulling the fairy lights with her to the floor. When Harry returned, bursting through the door with a cheery cry of

'Madam, your carriage awaits,' he found her still alive, clawing at her throat, her eyes wide with silent panic. She died before the ambulance arrived. As the ambulance men carried her out, swathes of jade-green taffeta spilled over the stretcher. Later, Harry found the diamond necklace on the carpet, a hard, steady glint hidden in the fallen, broken lights.

Now, Harry realized that he was wrong in thinking his tears exhausted. He cried once more, softly, wishing that his ghost-wife would return and tell him that everything was going to be all right. As Harry had returned to the living, so the dead had withdrawn. The remembrance of Sylvie brought an echo of the words she would have said: her terrible disappointment, her shame at the things Harry had told David. Had she been present, Sylvie would have whispered the one thing Harry dreaded, that her husband was not disgusted by David Daniels, but by his own self. David might chatter, but it was better than Harry's silence. 'Yes,' said Harry quietly, 'oh yes, Sylvie, yes.'

Harry stayed in the chair and almost fell asleep, until the knock at the door.

Harry stood, wiping the tears from his cheeks and blowing thick snot from his nose into his palm. Perhaps David had returned – not that Harry would apologize, of course, but at least he could let the lad back in and say no more on the matter. And for a second, Harry even

imagined that Sylvie herself would be standing outside, manifest in jade-green and diamond. As he went to the door, Harry noted that the dizziness had passed and the pain in his chest had eased off, he remembered his new conviction that his descent into Hell had stopped, and that things could only get better from this point on.

Then Harry opened the door and the nightmare started all over again.

To Roz's intense annoyance, the Doctor whistled while he worked. After returning from the TARDIS he had emptied his duffel bag on the table – Roz recognized some components from the central console, antique circuit boards, liquid memory wafers, an old chainmail waistcoat from the wardrobe and many rolls of sellotape. Now he sat tinkering with the pieces. He had produced a biro from his pocket which seemed to double as a soldering iron.

From time to time, chips of white hot metal would fly into the air, accompanied by a cheery 'Whoops!' from the Doctor.

Roz had asked why he couldn't work in the TARDIS, but he had muttered that the ship had been displaced a picosecond ahead as a safety routine.

Roz had nothing to do. She had bought the car. The Doctor had found some gold doubloons in the depths of his pockets and Roz had taken them to 87

a grimy, shuttered shop nearby which advertised 'Gold Bought And Sold'. The shopkeeper must be shouting with excitement even now, she thought. He had paid her four hundred pounds, a fraction of the coins' value, then ushered her out of the shop as fast as he could. Roz heard the door locking as she walked away and she even imagined the pop of champagne corks. She wondered what effect it would have on the timeline to distribute sudden wealth to an old backstreet jeweller, but she presumed that the Doctor had more important things to consider. Then, walking back to the Quadrant, she had passed a battered Ford Granada with £350 ono' taped to the windscreen. She had given the owner all four hundred pounds. More instant wealth, she thought, but what the hell, they haven't even got a Lottery yet. Then she drove back, angry. Cars were Chris's speciality. She was still fuming from the conversation they had had when she suggested that she and Chris should swap tasks, or at least join forces on the drug-hunt. The Doctor had pointed out to her, none too kindly, that the moment, she entered a pub or club and asked where she could buy cocaine, then either the place would empty or guns would be pulled.

Chris was out now, shopping. The Doctor had told him to find appropriate clothing for the nightlife of late-twentieth-century Britain. Chris had asked what that meant, exactly. 'Well,' the Doctor had said, 'little bit of this, little bit of that. Nothing's out of place. No one knows what they want to be in this era. Except the Ravers, but you're a bit too old for that.' Then he threw Chris a doubloon and went back to work.

Roz had spent the last ten minutes looking out of the kitchen window, feeling like the nosy neighbour in a holo-sitcom. She had watched people outside coming and going, trying to discern a pattern, any shred of knowledge which might prove important. But the patterns were formed by people and the people stayed private. She began to understand the Doctor's initial dismay upon surveying their new home. You could live fifty years in the Quadrant and not know half the things that went on. And the things you did know, you kept quiet.

Disconsolate, she had gone to watch the Doctor at work and to suffer his chirpy mood – not that Roz thought the Doctor's cheeriness was a good sign; if still waters run deep then choppy waters might cover turbulent depths below.

'Read this if you're bored,' said the Doctor, throwing her a *Daily Mirror* folded open at page seven. There was a report on the incident at the Capper's grave. It transpired that the skinned body was not the Capper's, but that of Scott Morris, a seventeen-year-old lad from the Baxter estate. A neighbour was quoted as saying, 'Such a good-looking boy. Lovely skin, never had a spot in his life.' Scott had a conviction for aggravated burglary, but the police confessed themselves lost as to why he had been murdered so brutally and with such precision, and equally, mystified as to why someone had stolen 88

Simon 'the Capper' Jenkins's corpse at the same time. The *Mirror* had its own theories and rattled on about innercity satanic cults. 'Look at the photo of the grave,' said the Doctor. 'That earth has been pushed up from below. It seems our late friend the Capper made his own way out of the earth. Very odd.'

'Of course it's bloody odd,' said Roz.

'Yes yes yes,' said the Doctor, waving his hand impatiently. 'But odder still that a creature – whatever's using the Capper's form, and it's obvious that something is – should force its way through six feet of soil when it has tribophysical properties. This thing's capable of dimensional shift, Roz, it could have transported itself from the coffin

to Alaska in the blink of an eye. Instead, it acts out Hammer Horror. Curious indeed.'

Roz narrowed her eyes and slowly, patiently, counted to ten. She knew that the Doctor couldn't stop his mind racing ahead, but she knew little about the mysterious tribophysics. Roz hated asking questions, but she stretched her arms and submitted to the routine, as many had done before her. 'Doctor, what's going on?'

In reply the Doctor put down his work and smiled, staring into space. 'That takes me back. Being asked questions, just like the old days. Perhaps this is middle age – thinking about the past. Years gone by have been creeping into my head of late. I don't know, it might be a sign of change to come. An assessment before the end.' Roz lit a cigarette as he continued. 'My life used to be a lot simpler – or maybe I was simpler and missed the complications, I wonder. But there were times when questions would be asked and I'd be there with the answers. Then off we'd trot. With a bit of luck and a bit of timing, there'd be a nice big bang to round things off just before tea. Happy days.

Maybe stupid days. Maybe both. But dead and gone now.' His voice darkened but the smile remained. 'You wouldn't have known me then, Roz. Literally.

I'm not sure we would ever have met. And I didn't notice it happen; the day when the universe got that bit darker at the edges. And that bit darker at the centre, too, in the hearts of men.' The Doctor watched the cigarette smoke solidify the sunlight. He puffed his cheeks and blew out, disturbing the delicate smoke spirals and reducing them to fog. 'I wonder if it gets worse.

The laws of thermodynamics would indicate that things rarely, if ever, get better. Change and decay in all around I see.'

After a pause, Roz said softly, 'You lived here once, didn't you? Lived here properly.'

'A long time ago,' said the Doctor. 'Not by choice, it was exile. But as exiles go, it wasn't too bad. No, not too bad at all.' The Doctor moved his head into the sun, pupils contracting to black pin-points. 'You've lived here yourself, Roz. It's more than likely George Reed is still alive. Had you thought of that?'

'No,' said Roz briskly and she stubbed her cigarette out, half-finished. Then

both fell into silence. The Doctor resumed his tinkering, and Roz watched the bulldozers circling the remaining walls of Red Hamlets, moving in for the kill. Just when she thought it was time to get back to the point, the Doctor suddenly cheered up again. He held a motherboard aloft and said, 'You see?

I used to do this sort of thing all the time. Knock up gizmos from bits of this and that. I once built a weapon in Shoreditch which could fry a Dalek at fifty paces well, ten paces. Now the habit's returning. Think about the past for too long and you start acting it out. First of all the time ripple detector in Little Caldwell, now this.'

'If you're enjoying it so much, then tell me what it's for,' said Roz, congrat-ulating herself on not using the interrogative.

'Right,' said the Doctor briskly, and he bowed his head over the device, working furiously. For a second, he whistled a poor impersonation of birdsong, but before Roz could complain, the explanation came. 'Tribophysics – literally, the science of interacting surfaces in relative motion. Friction, if you like,

'though the human race employs triboscience in a strictly three-dimensional sense. But it's an ancient art, Roz, dating back to the Time of Legend. The pinnacle of tribophysics is a means of slipping between dimensions – setting the dimensional interstices into motion and slipping through the gap. A rather convenient knack when your home's being firebombed. That's why I removed the TARDIS. Two separate dimensional shifts could have a rather violent collision. What we saw in the Capper's flat is a sure sign that tribophysics is still in use – and that's dangerous. The flicker of light we saw was an intertrigo –

an irritation, absolute proof that the dimensional breach is causing structural stress.'

'You said that this thing was older than you thought,' said Roz. 'Does that mean it dates back to the Time of Legend?'

'Possibly.'

'And if it's very old, does it equate that it's very dangerous?' The Doctor stopped working and looked at hen 'Undoubtedly. The Time of Legend might as well be named the Time of War. And not just for Gallifrey. There were countless civilizations forging their way through the stars, and all too many of them with a taste for battle. This thing might be a product of any of those races. The Osirans certainly used

tribophysics, but what's happening here is a little too crude for them.'

'And this thing's being carried in the cocaine?'

'That's what I want to find out.'

'How does Gabriel Tyler fit into this?'

'Exactly,' muttered the Doctor. The miniature soldering iron flared and bleached his face a pure white, eradicating lines and expression.

Roz turned away from the bright light and considered the implications. A 90

small voice at the back of her mind, which persisted despite her travels with the Doctor, complained prosaically that this was 1987; history told her that no great danger came forth at that date, that Earth should travel through the year with only the usual disasters to be recorded. But Roz knew that, like the Doctor's universe, time had grown darker at the edges and darker at the centre, and darker in the spaces in between.

Time now passed in silence. Then the Doctor called Roz to the table. His device looked like a child's first science kit, a mess of wires and circuits hammered into place. An LED counter winked at the right-hand side. 'Keep an eye on that,' said the Doctor. 'Make a note of each reading. It should recalibrate every thirty seconds.'

'What is this contraption?'

'It should transmit a rather complicated glue, to cement the dimensional walls. Tribophysical movement should become more difficult. If you're close enough.'

Roz had presumed that the Doctor intended them to work side by side, so she was surprised when he walked away put on his jacket and headed for the door. As the LED counter jumped from eight digits to seven, she called out,

'Where d'you think you're going?'

'Out,' said the Doctor 'Science is all very well, but I think the Quadrant has more stories to tell.'

Roz began to scribble down the readings, realizing that the Doctor had trapped her at the table. She was dressed for action in khaki trousers

and white vest but the Doctor had stationed her behind a pen. Annoyed, she called out, 'Information about what?'

'People,' said the Doctor, pulling the front door open. 'What's happening in the Quadrant is happening in the silences of its people. There's much to be found in the gap between what people say and what they leave unsaid.'

'Yeah,' muttered Roz. 'You're an expert in that.'

At one-thirty p.m. on Monday the twenty-seventh, Mrs Jericho's real madness began.

She walked out of the Frei Institute, deciding to go home and rest. Shopping would have to be cancelled. *Shop ing, shop ing, shop ing,* pleaded the Voice, but for once Mrs Jericho would have to let her internal friend down.

She was worried by the blood. It seemed that her colitis had returned. At least, she presumed it to be colitis, having consulted medical textbooks. She would not trust a doctor's opinion. The matter worried Mrs Jericho hardly at all. She thought with grim humour that watching Steven's illnesses had engendered one of her own. Her son was dying; it mattered little if she bled 91

on his behalf. No doubt she deserved it. Her home-prescribed remedy was to take a paracetamol, then go home and sleep.

She would have to sneak back into the house quietly, of course. Alfred had brought his work with him, arming their temporary home's conservatory with fax machines and a terminal, all supplied and maintained by the faithful Thomas. Alfred would be stationed at his desk at six in the morning to watch the Tokyo market close, and Mrs Jericho did not dare interrupt him now, after the markets had opened in New York.

Actually, she was glad that Alfred would be busy. She could go unnoticed to her bedroom – the Jerichos had separate rooms – and try to sleep. As she walked to the car, Mrs Jericho focused on the Voice. Always her companion, it changed its rhythm: *go home, go home, go home.*

Then she saw Steven.

The same Steven she had just left crippled and comatose on the top floor of the building behind her now stood on the far side of the road

beyond the car park, some two hundred feet away.

But this Steven was not sick, was not dying. He stood tall and unblemished, and scared. Surely not scared of her, not scared of his own mother? He was looking at her, Mrs Jericho was sure, though the sun glowed upon the whitewashed wall behind him, making his outline insubstantial. He raised his hand, a hand clean of oozing red psoriasis. He was waving at her.

Mrs Jericho wept. She had no idea that tears could come so fast or sting so much, and she heard herself making a sound from the back of her throat, a long, low moan. The Voice hammered *Ste ven Ste ven Ste ven*. She stumbled and fell against the car, and still the moan went on.

At the same time she found herself waving back, waving at the Steven of whom she had always dreamt, a boy who could walk and run and call her mother. Even as she waved she thought, this is it, this is madness, dear God in heaven, does madness have to be so malicious?

Her Steven, the one upstairs, had not walked properly for years, and problems with his coordination meant that he could not hold his head erect. He had shuffled, staring at the floor like a shy, stupid dog. As Mrs Jericho looked at the distant figure, she understood Steven's cunning. When she wasn't looking, he would slip out of his dry, wasting cocoon to run wild and free like a spirit of the woods. He had led this secret life all along, all these years, laughing in the sunshine while she kept watch over the Steven-shaped husk left in the hospital bed. Then while her back was turned he would slip back into his sick skin, would lie there giggling to himself, enjoying his cruel deceit and her unremitting misery. She had lost her life in mopping the brow of this lying child, and rubbing cream into his feet.

At the same time, she knew absolutely that this was impossible. Her son's 92

slow death had driven her mad and brought vile spectres to her mind. As if I haven't suffered enough, she thought, as if I haven't suffered enough.

Mrs Jericho had long since abandoned any belief in God but now she prayed to Him to strike her dead so that this vision might be taken from her eyes.

Conversely, she prayed that there was no afterlife, so that she might fall into oblivion, where no memory of this moment could ever return.

As she thought all these things and more, she stepped forward. The vision of Steven stopped waving and clenched his open palm into a fist, as though he feared her approach. ‘Steven,’ she whispered in her soft, bedside voice, ‘it’s me. It’s Mum.’ Despite the distance, Steven seemed to hear what she said. He tilted his head as though subjecting her words to cold analysis; as though he, not Mrs Jericho, could decide whether she was mother or not.

Then something snapped in her mind. All the caution and reserve with which Mrs Jericho conducted her everyday life fell away, and she found herself running, flinging herself headlong towards her phantom son.

Steven darted away; Mrs Jericho was blinded by tears and it seemed to her that he turned, then vanished. She stumbled against a concrete litter bin and fell to her knees, the Voice raging *it’s him it’s him it’s him.*

When she looked up, the street was empty. Mrs Jericho stayed on her knees for many minutes. She kept looking at the road and went on to all-fours, grinding her palms into the gravel, splintering her nails, and still she could not stop the howl ripping from her throat. Slowly, the agony passed and Mrs Jericho stood, wiped her eyes and ripped off the remaining flakes of fingernail. Desperately, she smiled, wondering what onlookers would think of this clumsy, wretched woman with bleeding knees. The thought that she might appear clumsy did the trick; Mrs Jericho straightened her skirt and flicked her hair back into position, took a deep breath and then exhaled. She summoned the remorseless logic which had steered her through forty years, and she calmed down.

The street was definitely empty. Mrs Jericho could no longer see her son, but she could feel him, not above and behind her in the Frei Institute, but out there somewhere in the complex of streets. If he were real, she had to find him, and if he were a ghost, then she had to damn herself with one more visitation. Her eyes narrowed in determination. She would hunt down her son, she would find him, and real or not, she would never let him go.

For all its elegance, the Frei Institute loomed above a bleak industrial wasteland. Mrs Jericho walked through the ruins of factories and wide, neglected streets with her head held high. Normally, she might have thought the area dangerous, but no danger could stop her now. The uncaring sun made her forehead shine with sweat – and ruined her fringe, she thought, flicking her head again and again – and she reached into her bag for her Ray-Bans. Wear-93

ing a red Yves St Laurent suit, she looked dressed to kill. And that, she decided, was exactly what she would do if some bastard was playing tricks –

She saw him again. She rounded the corner of a factory block and there was Steven, standing at the far end. He darted away, round the corner. This time, Mrs Jericho did not run. With dignity, only her breath betraying her panic, she strode the length of the factory and surveyed the street beyond: empty.

Patiently, she traced her path back. For all her glacial composure, the Voice was not calm: *get him get him get him.* She stood at the junction, perfectly still, patience on a monument. She looked left then she looked right, and saw no one. No matter. She could wait.

She saw him again. This time, he came running around the corner behind her. He must have doubled back to the Frei Institute and followed her original path. Mrs Jericho stepped towards Steven and he melted into shadow, hiding against the factory wall. She stepped into the road to search him out and he fled from his hiding-place, flitting out of sight back round the padlocked courtyard gate.

Mrs Jericho stood motionless for a good few seconds, then she walked the opposite way. She returned to the corner of the second slighting. She leant against the wall, surrendering for a second to the heat. She stared right into the sun, wanting it to burn these visions from her retina. Then she heard the scamper of footsteps approaching. Steven had doubled back again, just as she had calculated. And if you're making all this up, said the shreds of her reason, then it's no wonder he's following your path. You decide what happens because it's only happening in your mind, Eva, your poor, fractured mind.

Mrs Jericho threw herself around the corner. The sun was imprinted on her sight so she caught only a blur of movement – a little boy, charging into her path – as she clawed the air, reaching for him.

She held him.

He was real.

Steven twisted like a wild thing, bucking and kicking against her embrace.

'Steven,' she cried – and Mrs Jericho had never heard such passion in her own voice – 'Steven, it's me, it's me.' Steven only screamed, 'Leave me alone,' and it was the first time in months she had heard him

speak. It was him, oh yes it was him, the unbroken voice sweet with youth and inexperience, though the sick Steven had never spoken with such anger, not risking so violent an emotion to rack his body with pain. ‘ *Steven*,’ screamed Mrs Jericho, no longer caring if she looked clumsy. She grabbed hold of his shirt, exposing his bare back. She saw clean, white, unbroken skin. She tried to pull his face to her breast. Her voice deserted her, gasping only pitiful yelps, but the Voice was

strong: *hold him hold him hold him.* He thrashed against her, kicking her shins and punching her stomach. She would have held him for ever and sustained his blows for all eternity, until he yelled, ‘ *You’re not my mother!* ’ Then he shoved her against the wall and ran down an alleyway. As she stumbled, the heel of her shoe broke and she tipped sideways, thumping on to the hot pavement. Her breath rapid, she could pant only one word: ‘How. . . ?’ Then she realized that she was losing sight of him. The half-twelve sun slanted solid black shadow along the alleyway, and as she looked, Steven vanished into the depths. Mrs, Jericho kicked off both shoes and raced after him.

The far end of the alleyway opened on to an empty street. Empty of Steven, at least. In the distance, a young woman walked her dog, and to the right, in the factory’s shadow, an old man sat at the wheel of his car, with the engine idling.

Mrs Jericho watched the street for ten long minutes – the old man glanced at her every now and again, as though he found her very odd – but Steven had gone. She could feel his absence. She had touched him, smelt him, felt his breath, but now there was nothing. Exhausted, Mrs Jericho turned around and walked barefoot back to the Institute, close to despair, the Voice lamenting *Ste ven Ste ven Ste ven.* She began to cry again. She had to see the hospital bed, knowing what she would find. Her son had magicked himself back to his husk and would now lie there unmoving, denying her story and laughing to himself.

Of course, she knew that she had let slip her sanity, and that poor little Steven had not left his bed. She resolved to look upon him once more, and then to die that day.

The Voice was cruel, mimicking the cry she longed to hear. *Mu mmy Mu mmy Mu mmy.*

‘She’s gone,’ said Harry Harvey.

He watched as the devil-child heaved himself out of his hiding-place –

jammed beneath the dashboard on the passenger seat side – and looked at the street. Then the boy, eyes ablaze with monstrous, dark power, looked at Harry.

'Take me home,' said Gabriel Tyler.

Harry's Monday had become an insane carnival, shot with the gaudy colours of nightmare and inhabitated by the evil, grinning faces of clowns, tricksters who took the guise of little boys, tormenting Harry and making him their puppet.

At a quarter past ten in flat 28, Harry had answered the knock at the door and found little Gabriel Tyler standing outside. Harry had gone to shut the door without a word, wanting to return to dreams of Sylvie, but Gabriel had 95

stepped forward, looked up into Harry's eyes – *through* Harry's eyes and beyond, into his heart – and whispered the enchantment: 'I need driving.'

Harry avoided the stare and tried to push the door shut, but the child was lithe, nimble, darting like a goblin into the flat.

Harry was too tired to catch him, and could only listen as the goblin completed its spell. It said it had to go somewhere. It didn't know where, just somewhere out there in the Wide World, a place which little boys, or monsters in little boys' masks, could not reach on their own. But Harry could take him there. Nice, kind Harry Harvey could walk out of the Quadrant with a child on his arm, could put that child in his car and drive away without any bystander thinking it untoward. And if Harry said no, then the goblin would tell. Gabriel Tyler spoke Harry's greatest fear: he knew. Every single one of Harry's secrets was known to him. He said with delight that those secrets shone bright in Harry's eyes.

Harry groped his way towards the bedroom, his head spinning as fever slammed back home, the angles of the doorframe distorting into impossible perspectives and the floor lurching upward as flat 28 curved around him into a towering, Gothic fairground, but the demon voice behind him persisted.

Gabriel Tyler said all the things that should never be said. He chanted a rhyme of men, naked men panting and shuddering in the night-time places, in Harry Harvey's arms. Harry started to cry but the child said he would never stop unless Harry did what he wanted. Gabriel's final malice had been to conjure up images of a certain cemetery on

Saturday night; a man with alabaster skin, and the monster who had murdered him. Harry knelt, then lay on the floor, weeping. He could listen to no more, would do anything rather than bring back the memories of that night. He surrendered.

The young puppet master pulled the strings, and man and child walked to the car. The carnival continued as they drove, Gabriel sitting up in his seat with vicious excitement. He wound the window down so that he could smell the air and follow the scent of the unknown place which called him. Harry saw the roads tilt and tunnel in front of them, and for a second he begged to crash. Killing them both seemed the only escape. It was Sylvie who saved his life, blessed sweet Sylvie, a blur of colour in the corner of his eye – and there, again, in the mirror, a fragment of jade-green taffeta and the glint of diamond.

'It's all right, sweetheart,' came her voice, still ravaged by cigarettes. 'I'm here, Harry, I'm always here. He won't hurt you, not while I'm at your side, just do what he says and this will be over and you can sleep. Sleep, Harry, in my embrace.'

Eventually the devil-child had directed the car to the factory's shadow and for a moment, his magic seemed to fail him. He cocked his head like a dog listening for inaudible signals, then said quietly, 'It's not the moors. It's that 96

place.' He pointed at a modem office-block which rose above the industrial estate and backed on to open moorland. Harry thought that his torment might be over as Gabriel stepped out, but then he leant back into the car and with an eldritch smile, he said to Harry, 'Wait for me.' Gabriel ran to the office-block and Harry knew that he had no choice. He would wait or the demon would sing his song for all the world to hear.

While Harry waited, Sylvie nuzzled close to his ear. Now that the immediate crisis had passed, more of her wit and character coloured the wraith-wife. She spoke of days past, ordinary, uneventful days, and she even chuckled, deep and dirty, saying, 'You and all those men, Harry, wish you'd told me. All that excitement, and you never let me in on it. Clever little bugger.' Soothed, Harry did not panic as he saw the Tyler monster playing his hellish games at the end of the street. The boy spent an hour walking around the building, looking up at the top floor, sometimes opening his arms and leaning his head back as if offering himself to the tower block in sacrifice. Then he ran out of sight. Some time later he hared back to the car, dived into

hiding and left Harry to watch as the woman – another of Gabriel's victims – came in pursuit.

Now, as Harry drove back home, his eyes flicked constantly to the mirror, where Sylvie assured him that the carnival had spent its heat and the devil's dance was done. But when Harry and Gabriel walked back into the Quadrant and the boy finally went his own way, there was only the promise of further torture. As Harry turned towards his stairwell gasping for water, longing for his bare mattress and, strangely, hoping that David had come back home –

the dwarf fiend called to him one last time. 'Not a word, Mr Harvey. And tomorrow, we'll go again.'

An unusually solemn Gabriel Tyler trudged across the courtyard, wondering if Mum had discovered his lie. He had told her that he was going to Sam's and that Sam's mum might take them swimming. He had hoped to have an adventure instead, but if adventures were like this, if they left him bruised and scratched from a wild woman's clutches, then Gabriel wanted no more of them.

Worse than that, there were the things he had done and said, of which he felt ashamed. Gabriel liked old Mr Harvey, partly by association because he had liked Mr Harvey's wife, a lovely, loud woman who would swing Gabriel in the air and squash big, fat lipstick kisses on his cheeks. Gabriel told himself now that he had to make the old man help him; the tug of the moors in his stomach and lungs had been too great to ignore. Something wonderful was there and wanted Gabriel in its arms. So, terrified, waiting to be thumped round the ear for his cheek, he told Mr Harvey the things he knew. Gabriel did not understand most of them, seeing only tumbling images in Harry's eyes, 97

like a mirror fragmenting in the night sky – graveyards and knives in the dark and monsters in masks. Half of him thought that it was some film the old man had seen, but half of him knew better. Of course, Gabriel did understand that Mr Harvey was gay, which Gabriel thought harmless and rather funny. He could hardly expect Mr Harvey to react so strongly. Gabriel consoled himself with the thought, it's not me, it's nothing I've said, he's ill, you could see that the moment he opened the door. A drive on a day like this will do him good.

Then, when Gabriel ventured into the Wide World – which was just buildings and roads and people, a great disappointment – he had found the Tower.

He had walked up to the door and asked to be let in, but the security guard had told him to piss off. Gabriel had waited outside, not knowing why except that a nasty ache in his chest told him to stay; told him to come closer.

Then he met the Witch of the Wide World, the mad woman with black hair and talons, the enchantress whose spells had surely summoned him, and Gabriel decided that he would never adventure again in his whole life. He had escaped her claws by squatting down in the car and thinking fiercely, *I'm not here,* broadcasting his invisibility to his pursuer. It was a trick he had learnt in school when the older boys beat up his friends and stole their free-lunch vouchers.

As they drove back – Gabriel was glad to be going home, and poor Mr Harvey looked very ill indeed, he should get to bed – the nine-year-old boy worked out why he had earnt the Witch's wrath. She thought he was her son.

It had happened to Gabriel before. Two years ago, a couple called Eric and Yvonne had lived on the Quadrant's third landing, with their son Jim. One September morning, Jim was hit by a car and killed. For weeks after the funeral, poor Yvonne would lean over the parapet when she saw Gabriel and she would call out Jim's name. With a chilling, wet smile she would beckon to Gabriel, pleading, 'It's all right now, Jim, the car's gone. You can come home, now. Come home, Jim, there's a good boy, come to Mum.' Gabriel looked nothing like Jim, Jim was fourteen when he died, and Asian, but his mother would beg Gabriel to come to her until Eric would appear and gently lead her back home. By December, Eric and Yvonne had moved away and left no forwarding address. No one had heard from them since.

Other such incidents had occurred once or twice a year when Gabriel was out shopping with his mum. Complete strangers would run up to him, some would even take his hand and pull him away from his mother, calling him by the wrong name. Gabriel particularly remembered these times because of Mum's wild panic, her violence towards those who would claim Gabriel as their own.

Gabriel understood that some people – especially people who were sick or grieving or mad – would see in him what they wanted to see. For them, his 98

face was a mirror, reflecting back something in their own eyes. The same had happened with the Witch: he appeared as this 'Steven' to her, and with a vengeance. Of all the strangers Gabriel had attracted,

this one was the sickest, saddest, maddest of the lot.

For all his determination to escape the Witch's lair, the moment he and Mr Harvey got back to the Quadrant, the ache was there, making his heart beat faster and demanding his return to the Witch and the Wide World. So as he waved Mr Harvey goodbye, he heard himself asking whether they could do it again tomorrow, please, if Mr Harvey didn't mind. The old man looked as though he were going to throw up as he ran away, and Gabriel hoped Mr Harvey would get some well-earned sleep – though the boy was not entirely innocent; a pit in his stomach glowed with the pride of having an adult under his control, and looked forward to doing it all over again, only better.

Gabriel grimaced as the tug of the Witch pulled stronger with every step he took homewards. He assumed that the coast was clear because Mum wasn't in the courtyard waving his photo at mounted police. Looking up, he saw the little man who had moved in yesterday, the firebombing hero. The other new neighbour, the tall blond one, stood at the Quadrant's west exit, laughing and joking with David Daniels.

Gabriel could guess what was going on there.

The first man, the one with the hat looked down at Gabriel and held the stare, but Gabriel trotted into the stairwell's cool shadow, sat down and sulked. He wanted to avoid the little man. He had been too distant for Gabriel to look into his eyes, and something now told Gabriel that he never should.

Neither did he feel like going home. In his bedroom, the drawings would call him, the Witch's entrance into his mind.

Feeling tired and miserable and young, Gabriel thought of his *I'm not here* trick, the cloak of invisibility. To be free of the Witch, the spell would have to harden. Hide, it now became. *Hide.*

Mrs Jericho returned to the Frei Institute and the nurses made a marvellous fuss of her. She said nothing but they assumed she had been mugged – first one nurse said so, then another, and the idea swiftly became a fact. They bathed her knees and hands, and someone found her a replacement pair of shoes. 'My old Green Flash,' said the nurse, 'they're all but knackered but they'll do till you get home, love.' Mrs Jericho accepted their ministrations with a serene smile, reclining as if attended by maidservants in a lustral bath, the composition spoilt only by the flicking, flicking, flicking of her hair. In her head, she was calculating whether she had enough paracetamol in her handbag to

kill herself. Might as well try it, she thought. If it doesn't kill me, then I'll try something else. She looked at the top-floor window. Death by 99

defenestration had a certain appeal.

Steven, of course, was still in his bed, had never left his bed. Mrs Jericho almost cried again – though she would not weep in front of nursing staff –

as she remembered how she had thought this feeble creature could conceal a lively, malicious sprite. The memory confirmed her decision. Steven deserved a proper mother. He would be better off without her.

She knew what had happened, now. She knew that some poor innocent boy had been strolling past the Frei Institute only to have this shrieking woman raven him. She saw in the boy what she *wanted* to see. Perhaps there had been similarities, but the stranger was taller than Steven, probably a couple of years older. Perhaps, Mrs Jericho told herself, there had been no similarities. She thought, I'm insane and my madness will transpose Steven's face on any passing idiot. Soon I'll start seeing his features on tree-bark and statues. I've been wishing he was someone else since the day he was born; I've been wishing he wasn't mine since the first illness. And it's only just starting; how long before I start scouring the streets for a replacement son and snatch children from outside supermarkets, saying they're mine, they're mine? End it, Eva, end it and give Steven the only freedom he'll ever have. Release him from his unfit mother.

Mrs Jericho stayed at Steven's bed and hours passed. She did not notice the passage of time, indeed, in her mind only scant minutes seemed to elapse. She stroked Steven's face and whispered goodbye, while another Voice, no longer her friend, mocked *new son new son new son*. As the afternoon ticked away, the anticipated funeral in her mind was changing. Now it was her own, her coffin resplendent in white silk. Mrs Jericho had decided long ago that she would be buried rather than cremated; people cry more at burials. The image planted a seed of enjoyment in her barren misery, and Mrs Jericho realized that she did not need to rush things. Her mourners would speak better of her if she had phoned her husband first, to give a short, dignified farewell speech.

Her mobile phone was in the car. She dreaded going back outside in case a thousand people were passing and she would see a thousand Stevens, but she would deny the image. She knew her madness now

and could fight it for the little time she had left. Mrs Jericho bade farewell to the nurses, immensely cheered that they would later remember these as her final, noble words. One nurse said, 'I'll have me Green Flash back when you're done, ta,' and Mrs Jericho thought as she so often thought but would hopefully never think again: I knew she was going to say that.

She strode into the fading sunlight. It was a beautiful evening, warm and still; the sun would be pale and gold on her corpse. She looked for new Stevens, but the car park was empty. Smiling, she sat in her car. As she dialled home, she had only two regrets. The first was that she had unfinished busi-100

ness – she hadn't managed to go shopping. Secondly, she knew that wherever Sally Hunt was in the world, she would doubtless read of Mrs Jericho's death, and she would laugh. The Voice, meanwhile, urged *don't die don't die don't die*, but she paid it no attention, knowing it was selfish. When she died, poor Voice would die with her. It had been trapped inside her for all these years and wanted a little life of it's own.

Thomas answered and Mrs Jericho asked to speak to Alfred. A minute later, Alfred came to the phone. He sounded as if he had been running and he said –

with an atypical urgency, she thought – 'Eva? What is it?'

She spoke the neat epigramrnatic sentences she had rehearsed and it was all going terribly well until Alfred interrupted. 'Eva, my precious, what's wrong?

Why are you crying?'

Mrs Jericho was about to reply that she wasn't crying, would consider no such thing on such a glorious summer's evening, when she saw a spark of light fall to her lap, a teardrop. How ridiculous. Slowly she realized that she had not stopped speaking, that a weird, witch's wail was screaming, 'I saw him, I saw Steven, oh, help me, Alfred, I saw him!' The scream went on and Mrs Jericho could not cease its Impolite prattle as it told the story of the afternoon, while Alfred's voice pleaded, 'Eva, my love, oh, Eva.'

Suddenly, the greater part of Mrs Jericho's mind – the part which found this moaning very unnecessary, and embarrassing; Alfred was hardly a man with whom she could share an intimate confession, he was her husband, for goodness' sake – slammed down and took

control. In the middle of a word she stopped speaking and calmly folded the phone shut, letting Alfred's final plea die in the air.

Mrs Jericho had a new idea, and suicide could wait.

Alfred Jericho put down the phone and looked up at Thomas. The speaker-phone was on and Thomas had heard everything. In the silence, a terrible understanding passed between the two men.

There were two aspects to Alfred Jericho. At work he was a lion amongst men. He strode the markets with arrogance, as though he owned the financial domain. Indeed, he felt his entire life had arrowed towards the Eighties, when stocks and shares had finally become the language of the common man. He could look with pride upon frenzied, sharp-suited young men, his acolytes, while he was free to stand aloof and look down upon his electronic empire.

The excitement had not gone, though. He could still be thrilled by the speed of transaction as the transfer of cash whipped itself into metamarkets of virtual money. Secretly, in his heart, Alfred dreamt of witnessing a full-blooded Paper Collapse, a ruinous plummet into reality which would enable him to start all over again.

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A lion at work and a lamb at home; it was a relief for Alfred Jericho to come home to a woman who had decided in advance where and when they would eat, what letters had to be answered and phone calls made, and what Alfred should wear in the morning. He loved his wife, probably. His and Eva's marriage had become secondary to Steven's illnesses.

They lacked the energy to waste further passion on each other, but he felt comfortable with Eva and he wished for no other. He regretted deeply that his son had exhausted her over the years – though she seemed to have exclusive rights to sympathy; few people remembered to pity Alfred Jericho, but he never complained. The only blessing was that Eva did not seem to notice her fatigue. In front of the mirror she would list the ordinary complaints – wishing her profile a little less sharp, her breasts fuller, her hair more disciplined but thankfully, strangely, she did not see the pinch-lines slitting her lips and the sacks of grey beneath her eyes. Nonetheless, Alfred still thought her beautiful, and scorned the wandering hands of the majority of his sex.

Now, with a heavy heart, he gave his personal assistant instructions, although Thomas knew already what had to be done. Both felt deeply

for Mrs Jericho but knew her capable of anything in this state. Her, understandable madness could lead to terrible things.

Thomas left the house. The path of his car became part of the convergence of human and inhuman lots which would end in the death of thousands.

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Chapter 7

Winnie answered the knock at the door.

'Mrs Tyler. Good afternoon,' said the Doctor, and he gave a smile which Winnie did not trust. She asked him what he wanted, and then her new neighbour started to chat about anything and everything – the weather, the firebombing, all sorts of pleasantries to which Winnie paid little attention. She wanted to get back to her cleaning, but he kept talking, sometimes a little frantic, as if improvising, playing for time. She did not ask him in although it was obvious that the Doctor was waiting for an invitation, craning his head round to look into the flat. Winnie barred his way. She kept her home inviolate. Once, neighbours and friends had been very welcome in her house, but that was a long time ago.

Then this 'doctor' – the more he talked, the more, she doubted it was a genuine qualification – steered the conversation around to her children.

'Gabriel seems a nice lad,' said the Doctor, and now his smile was very thin and a certain ice glittered in his eyes.

'Yes, yes he is,' said Winnie, and already she was beginning to think of excuses to close the door.

'Popular,' said the Doctor, and he made the word sound like a dagger.

'Yes,' said Winnie. She'd say she was busy cooking, yes, that was it, she'd say she had to get tea ready and the kids would be home soon –

Then the Doctor spoke quickly, as if sensing the approaching lie. 'Tell me, Mrs Tyler just as a matter of curiosity, what date is Gabriel's birthday?'

She looked away, too late – he had seen the stab of fear in her eyes and surely he could hear her heart hammering as she muttered, her

voice failing,

‘Better get on, things to do –’

She was beginning to close the door, but he would not stop. ‘Just his birthday, Mrs Tyler, that’s a small thing to ask.’ Now she gripped the doorframe and completed the movement with a slam, cutting off his last words: ‘Was it December –?’

Perhaps he carried on talking outside, but Winnie heard nothing; her panic was too great. Stupefied, she walked into the kitchen, poured herself a large glass of red wine, then went into the living room, sat in the brown tartan armchair and gulped down the wine.

Eileen. Eileen Hearn. Eileen bloody Hearn and her prattling mouth. She’d 103

been talking last night; Winnie had seen her draw close to the Doctor, her face all sly and confidential and her mouth, talking, talking, *talking* –

Winnie stayed in the chair. She had a list of tasks: there was tea to cook, and the living room to clean, and the washing to air, and new punishments to devise for Carl, but Winnie did none of these things. Instead, she looked at the scars on her arms and she forced herself to calm down. In a strange way, the afternoon’s unexpected turn sharpened her wits. Over the years, the secret had grown dull and tired and confused in alcohol, but now Winnie could feel every deep breath in her chest, and her body felt galvanized.

As the minutes ticked away, Winnie thought the matter through, carefully, slowly, and with logic. Eileen couldn’t have said anything – she’d kept quiet this long, why would she speak now? The old bitch revelled in the keeping of secrets, she liked her silence and the power it gave her. And if, for some reason, she had told the truth after all this time, then Winnie would not be visited by sharp little Doctors, no, she would open the door to policemen –

There came another knock at the door.

For a whole minute, Winnie did not move, the alcohol turning to bile in her throat as the knock was repeated, becoming more insistent. Then, hoping against hope that this was coincidence, nothing more, Winnie went to the door; the hallway felt like an endless, solemn walk to some long-deserved punishment.

When she did open the door, there were no police outside, only something far worse.

'For God's *sake*, woman, what the hell are you doing here?' said the visitor.

'You should be gone, ten years back. You've no idea what you've done, you stupid bloody idiot.'

The visitor pushed past Winnie as though anxious not to be seen on the walkway. Even as Winnie slammed the door shut, she thanked God that Gabriel was round at Sam's, Bev was in the park and Carl was at his mates.

Her children were safe from the visitor and Winnie would face this alone. As the visitor kept talking, Winnie clutched her head and moaned; her pain was the size of the world.

For the first time in years, she thought of the knives in the kitchen drawer.

As soon as he left the Tylers' flat, the Doctor went to Mrs Hearn's. After their awkward parting of the night before, she seemed glad to see him, opening the door with, 'Well, if it isn't the plain Doctor. Come in.' The Doctor thought that she blushed, though it may have been the heat. Then their afternoon tea became less pleasant as the Doctor probed the Quadrant's history, abandoning caution as he caught the spice of distant madness on the air. Despite his brusque questions, the Doctor noticed that Mrs Hearn wanted him to stay.

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She sat close and, even when annoyed, stared into his eyes; she would lower her head and look at him from under her lashes. She was flirting with him.

The Doctor kept his distance. He had more important things to consider.

'"The world's more full of weeping than you can understand",' the Doctor said, and only then did she look down. 'Tell me why you said that, Mrs Hearn.

I know the poem and its title. I can only guess what it might mean, and I don't like the implications.'

She stood, fussing with the teapot and rinsing a clean cup while she pursued a tangent. ‘We used to be good friends,’ said Mrs Hearn, ‘me and Winnie and Sylvie Harvey. We’d go for a drink, enjoy a joke. We went to Blackpool once, missed the train and slept on a bench on the Golden Mile. Froze to death.

Wonderful night.’ Her voice softened as she went on, ‘That’s before Jacob did a runner. Mr Tyler. Little swine, we didn’t miss him, me and Sylvie. And he left Winnie his legacy, oh yes. He’d been running up debts and never said a word. Winnie had to cope, all on her own. And she did. Winnie coped.’

The warmth had gone from Mrs Hearn’s voice as she stared out of the kitchen window. Then she turned to the Doctor and said quietly, ‘You’ve no children, Doctor, I can tell. Neither have I. We can’t know the things you would do for them. The scars you would carry for their survival. The childless can’t pass judgement, we don’t have the right. No matter what we see.’

‘I’m not passing judgement,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re the one using the past tense. I take it you’re not Winnie’s friend any more. What happened? What did *you* see?’

Mrs Hearn gave a tight smile. ‘Nothing. We drifted apart. It happens.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘It happens.’

Then she said no more and their chances of friendship died in the silence.

As the Doctor walked to the door, he said coldly, ‘And I don’t suppose you know the date of Gabriel’s birthday, Mrs Hearn?’

She looked shocked and pursed her mouth in a silent ‘o’ before she could think of a lie. Then she stuttered, ‘I’m not really sure.’

But the Doctor held up one hand and said wearily, ‘It’s all right, I’m sure I know. Thank you for your time, Mrs Hearn.’

The Doctor returned to his flat – hurrying now, breathing the fever in the air – where Roz had calibrated the device. Chris returned home. As the Doctor had instructed, he had bought a mobile phone. While charging the battery, he displayed his other purchases: Levis, a white T-shirt and a leather jacket.

Roz pointed out that he had bought clothes identical to those he was

already wearing and Chris smiled sheepishly. He told them he'd arranged to meet the boy from flat 28, David Daniels, as the Doctor had suggested. David could show him the local pubs and clubs, where Chris could locate the Capper's cocaine.

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The Doctor picked up the device – the chainmail waistcoat reduced to a sash, on to which small circuitry panels had been welded. The Doctor apologized on the device's behalf, then told Chris how to use it, and why, and not to waste time.

Then for a long while, the Doctor stood alone on the walkway, not even saying goodbye as Chris set off on his mission. Below him, the Leathers' girls seemed excited and the Doctor heard whispers about extra money. 'Summer bonus,' called Irene Leather from the kitchen window, but when the girls saw the Doctor watching, they scurried away.

The Doctor listened to the sounds of the Quadrant, searching for its pulse, as he stared at the horizon. He looked right into the declining sun, envying its viewpoint: an omniscient onlooker able to discern the patterns from above.

Then the Doctor darted off, calling to Roz, 'Stay there.'

'Why?'

'Be ready.'

In a wide circle around the Quadrant, panic jittered along the telephone wires of the city, spreading the terrifying news:

The Capper's still alive, the bastard's not dead, he wants to see us. In the lock-up. Crimea Street. Tonight. What do we do, what the hell do we do?

At relative coordinates in a separate dimension, the Capper finished his interface with the telephone network. He giggled, and more and more the machine giggled with him. It ejected its internal alarm system into the Void.

New alarms grew in their place, but slowly.

The Doctor tried Mr Harvey's flat, knowing that the late Mrs Harvey had been Winnie Tyler's friend. He knocked on the door and then hammered, certain that someone was in, though no one replied.

In his bedroom-den, Harry Harvey entered the final cycle of his insanity. The morning's drive with the devil-child had been bad enough, but the afternoon's torments were somewhat more clever in their assault.

Harry shrank into a corner and hugged his knees and wept. In his eyes the room was blood-red, Satan's pit of fire in which Harry deserved to burn.

The knocking at the door resounded in his head, but he perceived it as part of his madness, more thunderclaps to torment him. Sylvie cast a shroud of jade-green and diamond to protect him, but now her whisper was urgent.

She hissed Winnie Tyler's name and said that her friend of old was in danger.

Sylvie said she'd once let Winnie down, had regretted it even in dying, but could not reach her now. Harry should go to her, help her. Harry did not 106

understand and did not move. He asked to join his wife in death as he stared at the wardrobe and the wardrobe stared back.

'Bog off,' Bev Tyler told the Doctor.

She had spent the afternoon in Irving Park, snogging Frank, Jan's boyfriend, and then punching him and demanding money or Jan would be told. Five quid richer, Bev had decided to go home because she was sunburnt and hungry. She had been avoiding the flat all day, disturbed by the memories gathering there, memories stirred by that Doctor. And sure enough, as she emerged from the stairwell, there was the Doctor, approaching from the direction of Mr Harvey's flat.

Bev turned back. Every time she saw the little man, her dreams broke into daylight, images of Mum, Christmas and the Tall Man flickering behind her eyes. Bev was heading for the stairwell, resolving to find the bottle of cider she and Maxine had stashed by the bins, when the Doctor called out, his voice sharp, a voice she had to answer. 'I've got no time for your tricks, Bev. Things are quickening around us. Tell me, has your brother Gabriel ever been ill?

Has he been to hospital?'

Bev couldn't stop herself turning back, couldn't stop herself saying, 'Yeah.

Eight months back. Appendicitis.' Then she found her faithful, teenage hostility. 'What's it to you?'

He kept his distance but his soft voice carried over the gap. 'Tell me about it, Bev.'

Bev's head jerked to the left as she thought she heard a noise from inside her flat – a cry or a shout. She told herself it must have been the television and looked back at the Doctor.

'Just a hospital,' she said and she frowned, physically trying to clamp down on her brain and stop herself saying more. She succeeded, but the thoughts would not cease as she remembered her visit to the bedside: Gabriel had gone to St Mary's but then he had been transferred to some posh place in London.

The doctor said that certain complications needed examination. Gabriel had been lonely and demanded that Bev and Carl visit, which would have cost Mum a packet, except the hospital offered to pay if it kept Gabriel happy.

Mum was puzzled but took the money. Then Gabriel came home and Bev thought no more of it.

She snapped out of the memory and set off for the stairwell. Again, the Doctor's call stopped Bev in her tracks. 'Who was Gabriel's doctor? Tell me, Bev, please. Just tell me one thing I can use.'

Bev had never been any good at remembering names – Dr Greek? Dr Gecko? – but Gabriel's doctor stuck in her mind for one good reason. With 107

a sarcastic smile, knowing such things would be outside the Doctor's

knowledge, she said, ‘He looked like Neil Tennant.’ Then, seeing more questions forming on the Doctor’s lips, she turned towards flat 41, giving up on the cider. The Doctor would only follow her to the bins, and at least her front door would bar him, even if it meant she’d have to sit through *Wogan* with Mum. She heard another shout from inside, a man’s voice; the television was louder than usual.

Behind her, the Doctor said one last thing. ‘Gabriel’s birthday is Christmas Eve, isn’t it?’

Bev froze. The evening sun cast her shadow on the door –

– there, again, the furious images, the same door she’d run through on Christmas Eve 1977, feet wet, tears coursing down her cheeks –

Tears? She hadn’t remembered crying, remembered only *Mum on the walkway* –

Mum and the Tall Man in the street –

The Tall Man turning, leaving, carrying –

Carrying?

Mum was carrying, the Tall Man was carrying –

Bev made a little noise, a grunt of pain. She hated the Doctor. He did this, he made her think, but it hurt and she wanted it to stop. Yes, Christmas Eve was Gabe’s birthday, she knew that –

Christmas Eve 1977

– and he’d be ten this Christmas, but so what? He’d just been born on the night she remembered, that’s how she knew the date so well. Gabe couldn’t be important, he was just a kid in his cot while Mum went out –

Went outside carrying, carrying –

Bev wanted to fling herself into the flat and bloody the Doctor’s nose on the slamming door. Just before the screaming started, she put her key in the lock.

As Bev began to twist the key, the Doctor turned away, flushed with anger.

He was getting nowhere, while a tolling bell deep within warned him

that somehow, somewhere, time was running out.

The Doctor despaired. He knew what he had become: a supporting player in the cast, denied the power and knowledge of the lead actors. He thought grimly that he deserved it. He had never paid his supporting casts much attention. He would lavish time on his companions and his contacts and his enemies, but the faceless extras went ignored; the guards and villagers and rebels and passers-by who had fallen, nameless and unmourned, in the Doctor's battles. These people never knew why they died, never had the chance to understand that greater issues had taken precedence over their little lives.

They knew only life one minute and death the next. Now, they had their 108

revenge. The Doctor had joined their ranks, powerless and ignorant and forgotten while disaster swept all around.

Now, right now, as the slow-motion Bev still twisted her key in the lock, the Doctor gave up. He would go back to the flat and tell Roz that, for once, he was lost. The Quadrant had defeated him.

Bev did not complete the turn of the key. Someone opened the door from inside before she could push. She stumbled forward. Then she looked up, and up.

She looked into the face of the Tall Man.

She started screaming.

The Doctor turned round, to see a tall man pushing Bev out of his way. The man was scared, frightened of Bev's screams and desperate to escape. Bev clawed at his expensive coat, yelling things even she did not understand as memory ruptured her mind. Then the man pushed past her and ran to the stairwell.

Calmly, the Doctor shouted, 'Roz!' She appeared at the door of their flat.

The Doctor pointed leisurely as the tall man emerged at the bottom of the stairwell and ran across the courtyard. Roz smiled as she jumped over the first-floor parapet, landed easily and gave chase.

The Doctor ran to Bev, who sat on the floor wailing like a toddler. He was about to comfort her when he looked through the open doorway

of the Tylers'

flat, and he froze.

It had been arrogance to think himself despairing: this was despair. Winnie Tyler stood against the back wall of her living room, and she was destroyed.

The last time the Doctor had seen Winnie she had smiled politely and gone back to the stove. Now she stared wildly as though the outside world came to crucify her, and the fact that her daughter could see her brought more terrors. She beat her own chest with her fists, then slammed the ball of her palms against her forehead, as though only unconsciousness could help. The lifting of her arms revealed the old scars underneath, and her T-shirt rode up, showing identical scars criss-crossing her stomach. She made only a terrible, gulping moan, her drooling mouth opening and closing. When Bev started shouting, Winnie Tyler sank to the floor and curled into a ball, trying to block out her daughter's voice.

There were bank notes scattered on the floor; ten-pound notes, dozens of them.

Bev's distress had turned to rage. Standing behind the Doctor as if needing protection from her own mother, she ranted, ' *She took him!* I remember. Oh God, I remember now. I got up on Christmas Eve an' I *saw* her. I saw the bitch.

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She took Gabriel. She went into his room an' picked him up an' took him out.

Carrying, she was carrying. Carrying Gabe. She had a baby in her arms, she gave him to the Tall Man. She took my brother an' she *gave him away!* '

The Doctor said quietly, 'No.'

The man raced to his car at top speed, horribly aware that the black bitch was close behind. His legs were long and she was short, but somehow that didn't seem to help. She looked like a commando, in khaki trousers and white vest, and she thundered after him with violence in her eyes.

He had detested coming back to this filthy place. He had been born on

an estate like this and only his cousin had saved him. He had hoped to see the last of the Quadrant in 1977, but his return had been forced upon him by that stupid, stupid Tyler woman. Whenever he saw Pools winners on television declaring that their windfall wouldn't change their lives, that they'd keep their humdrum jobs and their humdrum friends, he thought the, same as he now thought of Winnie Tyler: poverty of ambition. She should have moved, why hadn't she moved?

He reached the Rover and was just thinking he'd escaped when he felt his pursuer grab his hair. She pulled back then pushed forward. He had an excellent view of his own forehead shooting towards the car door, then no view at all.

The Doctor could only coax Bev back inside the flat because neighbours were starting to come out of their doors, alerted by the screaming. Covering her tears, she ran into the front room and cowered as far as possible from her mother.

Winnie was in shock. She would look at her daughter then shrink away, still howling, as though she felt herself leprous.

The Doctor ignored all this and sharply told Mrs Thomas and Mrs Evans to go away when they appeared in the open doorway with mock-sympathetic eyes, sniffing out a juicy tale.

The Doctor went to Gabriel's room.

He

stood absolutely still, then suddenly knelt down, reached beneath the bed and pulled out Gabriel's drawings. There were hundreds, of them, all varia-tions of two images: a crude witch's face, staring and wild, with a scribble of black hair, and over this, on every page, there were slashes of black ink, an empty noughts-and-crosses grid, drawn and drawn again as though the image fevered little Gabriel's mind.

'Noughts and crosses,' mused the Doctor, then he went back to the hall as he heard Roz dragging the tall man's body along the walkway.

'They don't come small in these parts,' said Roz, panting from the exertion.

A muffled ringing noise surprised her. The Doctor walked forward and took 110

the mobile phone out of the unconscious man's coat pocket. He put

the phone to his ear and said sharply, 'Yes?'

'Thomas. . . ?' The voice was male, middle-aged, perhaps older.

'I'm afraid Thomas is unable to take your call,' said the Doctor, 'but if you'd like to leave a message –'

The line went dead. The Doctor threw the phone to Roz then both looked up as they heard Mrs Tyler say something.

'Thomas,' said Winnie. 'Thomas.'

Thomas had destroyed Winnie nine and a half years ago, and today he had returned to destroy everything she had rebuilt since that day. He had stormed into her flat, cursing, hurling accusations, and caring nothing for Winnie's despair.

'The south coast, you said,' spat Thomas, 'or Bristol, you said, or Bath, somewhere clean and civilized, you said, somewhere you could bring up kids.

And what do I find? You're still here, you're still in the bloody Quadrant!' He looked around the room, his face contemptuous. 'I can see where the money went. Booze and fags. I didn't give you thirty thousand quid to drink yourself to death.' Then he stopped and controlled his temper, although his words could only increase Winnie's terror. 'They're *here*, Winnie. The family. In town. And God knows how, but Gabriel's found them. Do you understand?

The danger we're in? *Gabriel's found them.* '

Winnie began to cry aloud. Weary, Thomas sat opposite her, impatient but calmer, telling her to stop and to listen. 'We had to come here. They said last week, the family's going north, but I thought, doesn't matter, the Tylers will be long gone. I should've known, you can't be trusted. Now look, Winnie.

Here's some money. Go on holiday, today, right now, and take the bloody kids, get out of town as fast as you can.' He reached into his jacket, then leant forward and put a stack of ten-pound notes in Winnie's hand. Thomas attempted a smile, his voice softening. 'A thousand quid, Winnie. Use it. Get out before the whole thing blows up in our faces. And we'll forget this thing ever happened. So long as you get Gabriel out of the way.'

Winnie looked at the notes. His solution made sense but she had

touched his money before, with terrible consequences. Now resentment burnt in her heart and it grew, filling Winnie with a slow, steady anger. ‘Why?’ said Winnie carefully, and she felt able to meet his stare. ‘Why should I do what you say?

This is our home. It’s always been our home. You’re the visitors, you can leave. The family doesn’t belong here, I don’t want them here.’ Her anger soared into fury, and she screamed at the man she had cursed so often in her mind, ‘You get out, you! You lied to me all those years ago, how do I know you aren’t lying now? Take your money and take your family and leave us 111

alone!’ She threw the money at him, but as the paper fluttered through the air, twisting gently to the floor, she saw to her amazement that Thomas was actually upset.

He looked exhausted and so much older. She saw a profound sadness in his eyes and she remembered the Thomas she had last seen on Christmas Eve. That night, there had been an intimacy between them, man and woman tearing their hearts open, Thomas actually weeping over the bargain they had struck, even as he tempted her with an increased fee. There was an echo of that old Thomas as he said now, ‘Winnie, you’re not the only one that’s suffered. You can’t know how things have been. The family’s had its problems, perhaps more than you. We can’t leave town. We have to stay.’

He paused then said ‘This is the only place we can save his life.’

Thomas explained. He told her about the Frei Institute, and the treatments, and the nine and a half years of agony.

Winnie’s only hope had been that the family prospered, and as that hope was taken away, her real nightmare began.

The Doctor knelt down beside Winnie. ‘Mrs Tyler,’ he said urgently, ‘where’s Gabriel, where is he?’

Her son’s name seemed to torture the woman. ‘Gabriel,’ she wept, clutching the Doctor’s jacket. ‘Don’t let him see me. Don’t tell him.’

The Doctor slapped her across the face, hard. ‘Where is he?’

She managed to gasp, ‘He’s at Sam’s. He must be. Thomas said he’s across town, but he’s not, he’s at Sam’s’ The Doctor leant in close and she looked into his eyes, understanding his unspoken question. ‘Sam. Flat 4.’

The Doctor nodded at Roz and she ran off, pushing her way through the crowd beginning to gather outside.

Behind the Doctor, Bev stared at her mother. For almost ten years, Bev had forgotten, but now she could not stop remembering.

– little Bev's in the doorway and Mum's on the walkway and Mum looks round and her eyes are black with mascara black with fear, and she clutches the thing she's carrying, the bundle, the child, then the Tall Man's going to his car and he's taking the thing, the bundle, the child –

Bev was gathering strength. Slowly she walked across the room and then she threw herself at her mother, thumping, kicking and scratching. Winnie did not defend herself, accepting her daughter's punches as Bev spat, 'You took him', you took Gabe, you handed him over like meat. All the years shamed of you, all the kids taking the piss in school, laughing at my drunk slut of a mother, and *I defended you!* You liar, you liar, you – '

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By now, Bev was in the Doctor's arms being swung across the room. She struggled until the Doctor slammed her against the wall, looked right into her face and hissed, 'No. She turned her head away but she could still hear him.

'You've got it wrong, Bev, just think. Christmas Eve, your mother gives Gabriel away, Christmas Day, *Gabriel's still here*. Isn't he?' Bev turned to the Doctor to bite him but then she stopped, transfixed by his eyes; by the shards of crystal turning in their depths.

– it's Christmas Day and Bev's got a toy pony and Carl's got the Sex Pistols and Gabriel's got the family, he's in the living room, lying on a blanket and looking to one side, always looking to his left –

Softer now, the Doctor continued, 'You're angry Bev, but you still can't remember why. Your mind's fixed on to the night of Christmas Eve, but there must be something else, something that came before. Something that scares you so much you've blocked it out completely. Forget the Tall Man, think of your family. The answer's there.'

He let go of her. Calmly, she wiped her eyes. Then she was gone, bolting through the door.

The Doctor was left alone with Winnie Tyler. A minute passed in

silence before they spoke their last words together. Winnie looked up and whispered, ‘You know, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘I know.’

He looked at this world of weeping and he did understand. Sometimes he wished he could be blind and deaf and dumb, and free of his talent, but that choice did not exist. Around him he still felt the quickening of events above and beyond poor Winnie Tyler, and he could give her little time. He said quietly, ‘I know how easily terrible things are done. And I’ve known myself that once you invite disaster into your house, it can never leave. We tell ourselves that the end justifies the means, but we forget that there is no end. Every day and every night the burden stays on our back. No one else car, understand the things we have to do.’

Barely audible, she said, ‘Then you don’t blame me?’

He smiled sadly. ‘Winnie, how could I? If you knew the things I’ve done.

Always, at the time, the best of actions for the best of reasons, and all of them haunting me still.’

Then the Doctor stepped back as Roz returned with the news that neither Sam nor Sam’s mother had seen Gabriel all day. Winnie’s anguish returned.

She curled into a ball, whimpering Gabriel’s name and another’s The Doctor joined Roz on the walkway and indicated the unconscious Thomas. Right,’

he said briskly, ‘carry him back to his car and wake him up. His name’s 113

Thomas and he knows where we’re going.’ He looked up as Mrs Hearn approached nervously, the crowd’s delegate. Without looking at her, the Doctor said brusquely, ‘I think Mrs Tyler needs to be left alone. But if you want to do something after years of doing nothing, Mrs Hearn, then you can find Gabriel Tyler. Find him and keep him here until I get back.’ The old woman bowed her head in shame but the Doctor ignored her, helping Roz to prop up Thomas.

‘What about Winnie?’ said Roz.

‘Hers is an entirely human tragedy,’ said the Doctor. ‘I haven’t got

time for such things.' He reached forward and pulled the door of flat 41 shut.

By the bins, Bev Tyler sat covered in rubbish. She wept with despair, just as her mother had done all those years ago. Bev swigged cider from a bottle and at last, she knew what had happened.

Mum came home from hospital on Christmas Eve, earlier than she had promised. Boxing Day had been threatened, a nightmare, because Bev and Carl were staying with miserable Mr and Mrs Skinner. Everyone hated nasty Mr Skinner, even his own daughter, a quiet, broken girl who left home as soon as she was old enough, to live in Gloucester, never to be heard from again.

Bev was delighted when Mum turned up at the Skinners', then dismayed when Mum asked Mrs Skinner if the kids could stay a bit longer because she was dazed and tired, still in pain. Bev and Carl both wailed, saying it wasn't fair, it was Christmas. This made Mr Skinner angry – he'd lose his temper at a speck of dust – and so Mum had no choice but to take Bev and Carl home. They asked to see the baby but Mum shushed them, saying that babies couldn't be seen, not at first. Bev and Carl carried germs, they had to promise to stay away. Bev and Carl nodded solemnly, though Bev remembered when Mrs Fisher-D'Sotiza at number 30 had a baby, Daisy Fisher-D'Souza had been held aloft straight away, like a prize. But best not to argue, Mum seemed to be in agony, though half-drugged.

Anyway, Bev and Carl had more important things than brothers to think about, they had Christmas. For all her excitement, Bev remained curious.

Quadrant visitors kept calling all evening, asking about the baby. Mum would stay in the door, barring the way, saying he was sleeping, even when Bev could hear him crying in his room.

Then Bev's chance came. Mrs Hearn called round and stayed in the doorway for ages. She and Mum talked in low voices, and Mum was crying again, though Mrs Hearn was not; she seemed angry. Bev seized the moment. On tip-toe, excited, thrilled by her own daring, she went to Gabriel's room. The layout had been different in those days. Gabriel's room then was the back bedroom, where Mum and Dad had slept. Mum had abandoned her comfort 114

and made the settee her bed so that Bev, Carl and Gabriel could have a room each – and so Mum could have access to the kitchen, where

the bottles were.

Listening out for any change in Mrs Hearn's muttering, Bev crept up to the cot.

She saw two babies: Gabriel, gurgling and fretting, and to his left, another boy. Bev's other brother lay there, seraphic and unnaturally silent and somehow glowing.

Mum had never mentioned twins, never. Even now, she spoke about the back room as if it contained one boy, not two. Bev felt a profound fear, the fear she had felt in days of old when she used to hear Mum and Dad having sex. She knew that this was something adult, strange, forbidden, something of which she should never speak. She left the room.

Then Bev Tyler forgot.

We forget because we must.

Five miles across the city, Mrs Jericho had almost completed her task. It had taken an eternity, all of twenty minutes. If she lived past this day – and the paracetamol still clinked in her bag – she would make sure that the staff of this place were sacked.

She had stopped her desperate conversation with Alfred so embarrassing to think of it, now – because of what she had seen. In some ways, the summer sun was to blame for the final sequence of events. It had pierced below the car's visor so that Mrs Jericho had to shift in her seat while talking. As a result, she had seen the security camera outside the tower block. The Voice whispered *cam ra cam ra cam ra.* Poised once more, she had switched off the phone and went inside to see the tapes.

The Frei Institute occupied only the top floor of the building. The other floors were rented by estate agents and a branch of the Inland Revenue. Getting permission to see the tapes involved negotiating the red tape lacing together five separate companies. Authority from the Frei Institute had no effect. The chief of security told her that the Institute had only been installed a week ago and had yet to sign for its share of security provisions. Mrs Jericho was surprised. Dr Greco had said that his facilities were well known and long-established, but of course, doctors always lied. Much prevarication had ensued as the guards debated whether it was legal for Mrs Jericho to view the footage. Money had solved the problem. The uneducated were easily impressed and easily bought.

Now, Mrs Jericho stood behind a rather jolly engineer as he spooled back to one-thirty p.m. She relaxed. The stupid security men had driven her to a frenzy inside, though on the outside she merely flicked, flicked, flicked her hair. Summoning her blessed serenity, she knew what she would find. The 115

cameras would show either a mad Mrs Jericho talking to thin air, or her pursuit of some poor boy who looked a little or not at all like Steven. As soon as she knew for sure, she could get on with the real business of dying.

'There you go,' said the engineer and he started eating a bag of crisps.

Mrs Jericho looked at the screen. She did not move, while something as wide and cold as a glacier cracked in her heart. Her mind kept ticking over, despite the roar of the Voice, *Ste ven Ste ven Ste ven*. She had reached the correct conclusions long before she spoke; she knew that nine and a half years ago, she had been told a lie.

'Tell me,' she said brightly, 'my eyes aren't what they were. That little boy.

What does he look like?'

'Just a kid,' said the engineer, his tongue rooting mashed crisp from his teeth. Dunno nine or ten.'

Smiling, Mrs Jericho took a photograph of Steven – Steven on a good day, head propped up and comparatively free of psoriasis. She showed the photograph to the engineer. 'Does he look like that?'

'Yup,' said the engineer. 'Same kid.'

Mrs Jericho gave the man a twenty-pound note and walked from the room.

She would not kill herself. Neither would she go shopping, not yet, although the best shopping trip of all time lay ahead: she had damaged goods to return.

Instead, she would perform that other duty of a good and, loving wife. She would cook.

As the lines of the pattern converged, they contained a fatal divergence. The Doctor, Roz and Thomas did not arrive at the Frei Institute until thirty minutes after Mrs Jericho's departure.

The staff recognized Thomas as the Jerichos' personal assistant and granted the trio access. They entered the cool, shadowed ward and stopped. They stared in silence at the wreck of nine-year-old Steven Jericho, his ventilator hissing at his side. The nursing staff were quiet, somehow picking up the solemnity of the Doctor's mood as he stepped towards the bed. His dark voice echoed across the room.

'"Come away, O human child! To the waters and the wild. With a faery, hand in hand, For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand."

,

The Doctor placed a hand on Steven's brow and said softly, 'The title of the poem is "The Stolen Child". Although this wasn't theft. The boy was bought and paid for. Steven Jericho. Gabriel Tyler's twin. And I think he's dying.'

Thomas looked down, Roz swore quietly, then the room was silent again, save for the sound of the ventilator hissing and hissing again. The Doctor 116

looked up at the only thing Steven Jericho could see: the ceiling tile in a noughts-and-crosses grid.

117

Chapter 8

Something is rotten in the state of Denver, or whatever, thought Chris. The drug hunt had not gone as planned. The Doctor had told Chris to cast his net wide, warning that if he sought cocaine in the Quadrant's vicinity, they would be suspicious of a healthy, fresh-faced, desperate-for-coke newcomer, and the Doctor didn't want Molotov cocktails through the window of flat 43. Briskly, as though he wanted to be elsewhere, the Doctor had said, 'Just ask for coke –

the street names change every week, but coke's a constant. We're about four months too soon for the crack explosion, but if it's being sold as crack, that'll do, so long as it's been compounded from the consignment we're after. Buy as many grams from different buyers as you can. Though not in the same pub, not if you treasure that lantern jaw. Then get back here, quick sharp.'

Then, David Daniels had been a poor guide, taking him to the wrong pub –

a busy, friendly bar near the city centre, full of men. Once more Chris questioned the TARDIS's translation facility. Twice, David's older friends had snickered behind Chris's back, 'Vada the bone lallies on her,' and a man called Mitch kept muttering 'Oh, *lucky* shirt.' At one point, David had exchanged cheerful insults with three mustachioed men in lumberjack shirts, then turned to Chris and said dismissively, 'They're just jealous. They're clones.'

'Really?' said Chris, and he blinked.

Chris then had to confess that this wasn't the venue he had in mind; he needed cocaine. David had looked shocked, then almost impressed as Chris gave his best hopeless shrug and said, 'It's a habit. Sorry.'

'It's going to cost you,' David had said. 'I might have known – handsome and rich. That's not fair.'

Then – David less excited, but determined to stick with him – they had driven to The Lamb and Flag on the Baxter estate, where David said they could get a fix. Everyone had stared as they walked in. David hissed at Chris to switch his mobile phone off, for God's sake; if it rang in here and attracted attention, they'd be pulped. David, squinting, had spotted some men at the bar who could help. He knew them as associates of the Capper. David had gone to them, telling Chris to stay put and echoing the Doctor's words, 'One look at you and they're gonna think pretty police.'

At that point, Chris had detected something rotten. The men were on edge.

When David asked for 'snow', they swore and pushed him away, and Chris 119

saw the bulge of a gun in one man's pocket. Chris and David made a swift exit. Next, they had tried The Eagle's Nest, then The Hope of Endeavour and Annie's Club, and the same two things happened: either the men David expected to find dealing were absent, or those they did find were drinking hard and fast and weren't trading tonight. 'Tomorrow,' one of them had leered at David, tomorrow it's business as usual, now piss off, queer shit.' Chris's Adjudicator antennae told him that trouble was in the air. The dealers seemed to be galvanizing themselves, slamming whiskies on the bar and mockwrestling each other. They were men pumping themselves up for a fight. The Capper's name was a constant murmur in their huddled talk.

Chris and David had been about to drive away from Annie's Club – in

a hurry, after someone had chucked a glass at them – when Chris saw the car parked under the incline of a sorry tree. The Doctor had told him the registration. It was the car which had attacked the Capper's flat. Chris had told David to get out and go home, but David had been protesting that he wasn't about to walk through Baxter's alone, at night, when two of the dealers from the club – both teenagers, one black, one white – had climbed into the car and driven off.

Chris gunned the engine and followed, thinking how much he loved these old transmission drives. They felt solid and meaty in his hands, with no au-tosystems to guide and compensate. Proper cars for proper drivers.

They had stopped three streets away and watched the two men enter a terraced house. David had told Chris to park further away. 'They'll see us here. People only get away with spying from cars in films, not real life, matey.'

They had retreated to the adjoining wasteland and watched as car after car disgorged more men into the house, all of them psyched up, shouting and jostling. Loud, aggressive music started booming from the front room and Chris could see silhouettes of men flinging themselves around in a frantic, drunk dance. He knew from experience that these men were becoming dangerous. As the party went into full-swing, Chris and David settled down for a long wait. Chris phoned the flat.

Flat 43 was empty. The ringing phone joined with a hammering at the door as the Greek chorus of the Quadrant's women finally became active in the drama.

Mrs Thomas, Mrs Evans, Mrs Skinner, Mrs Fisher-D'Souza, Sam's mum and others acted on the Doctor's instruction and called out the name of the missing Gabriel Tyler. The women were concerned and excited, and somehow they feared for both the boy and themselves. Perhaps they caught the bite of fever in the air, as panic encircled the Quadrant, riding the night and encroaching on their little lives.

Winnie Tyler did not join them. She was staring at her knives.

* * *

120

David had been having the time of his life – which showed, he thought, what a pathetic life he had.

His Monday had perked up immensely after Harry's strange fit, so different from his everyday contempt. David had got used to Harry's sneering homo-phobia and many of David's friends admired him for sticking with Sylvie's swinish husband and looking after him. David knew otherwise. He was inca-pable of altruism. He stayed in flat 28 because Harry did not charge rent and Harry never would, because that would make their arrangement legitimate and permanent, whereas its current standing made it a favour to Sylvie, nothing more. David could endure Harry's scorn because it came cheap. David's Giro was a measly £30.40, but out of that he only had to stock the fridge once a week and clean the loo. What did it matter if he had to sleep one room away from a potential queerbasher? He'd done the same as a kid.

Then, just as David was enjoying himself in the slough of despond, Chris Cwej had asked him out. David had whizzed round to his mate Mitch's bedsit.

Mitch let him shave and shower and lent him his lucky shirt, a bright blue viscose and-cotton mix, copping off a guarantee.

Now Chris put the phone away. He muttered that this Doctor bloke wasn't in and inspected his ear in the car mirror.

'Looks sore, that,' said David.

'Don't worry,' said Chris. 'It'll sort itself out.'

David could not see what was happening at the distant rave because he never took his glasses on a date, so he kept chattering, albeit in a spy-film whisper. He romanticized his past so that Chris would feel sorry for him; the sympathy of the beautiful is a rare treasure. He told how Mum and Dad had chucked him out (half-true), how Sylvie Harvey had taken him in, treating him as her own son (very true) and how he now looked after Harry's every need because Harry begged him to stay (a lie).

Chris smiled and David considered that the marvellous thing about handsome men was that they didn't stay handsome once you'd spent time with them. They became ordinary and more approachable, with the little flaws showing. Chris's teeth were a bit strange, almost pointed, and he was a bit too muscled – he should slim down, like the lovely Morten. David had worked out that Chris wasn't gay, not yet, but David had slept with enough straight men to know that hope never died. There was something naive about his new friend.

Sometimes he would look at things wide-eyed, like those people at the end of *Logan's Run* – the film, not that crap telly job – marvelling at the brave new world outside. Also, Chris was a poor deceiver. He didn't have a drugs habit and he was too ignorant of the Baxter estate to be police, so David's mind leapt to the most glamorous conclusion: he must work for the telly.

For all David's excitement, Chris's determination to stalk the cocaine dealers 121

now gave him cause for concern as the distant party thrashed louder. A walk back through the estate would be Preferable to getting caught in a gunfight.

In that case, there was no point in wasting time.

'So,' said David cheerily, 'I suppose a shag's out of the question?'

Chris laughed, blushed, said, 'Sorry.'

Better than a punch in the face, thought David, and said so.

'Why would I do that?' asked Chris, looking away from the party house for the first time.

It was David's turn to laugh. 'Well,' he said. ' *Because.* '

'Things aren't like that where I'm from,' said Chris. David was puzzled by these occasional references. Sometimes it sounded like Chris came from London, sometimes California, sometimes Beirut and whichever city it was, Chris had surely lived in some sort of hippy commune. 'We had enough problems,'

Chris continued, 'but the only problems with sex were the universal ones.

Jealousy, lust, unrequited love, all that stuff. Only once in a blue moon did it hinge on sexuality itself.'

'Wouldn't surprise me if that's where you lived.'

'Where?'

'On a blue moon.' Then David watched as Chris laughed with surprising vigour. David felt braver, so he said, 'Like Sammy Jo said to Krystle's double, all cats are grey in the dark. The thing is, Chris, homosexuality's just a design flaw. In the entire male species. I mean.

If we had a hinge in the spine so we could get our heads down to our laps, every single man in the world would sit like that, every night. Then straight men wouldn't be shocked by gay men,

'cos they'd have done the same to themselves.' Chris was laughing even more, so David lit a cigarette, keeping the match flame hidden from onlookers at the rave house. 'Thing is, Chris. I always say there's no point in dying before you've tried everything. I've had sex with a woman. Joyce Carew. I was fifteen, we laughed all night. Disaster, but at least I tried it. You don't want to end up a handsome old man, Chris, sitting in a home thinking, "Never did that." Better to regret a single night than regret missing it.'

David's speech was well rehearsed and well delivered and well useless most of the time, but he saw Chris smile, looking to the middle distance. Chris said softly, 'My friend the Doctor says much the same thing. He told me once, "The things we see, we have to see. If we turn away, then we're blind." And the Doctor's a very clever man. Cleverer than I'll ever know.'

David said, 'Well, then.'

'Well then,' said Chris.

At the far end of the street, hostile armed men came to party, and twenty minutes passed.

* * *

122

Roz returned from reception, saying, 'Chris has turned off his phone.'

The Doctor nodded and asked the nurse for the tiny screwdriver which she used to repair her glasses. He had torn Steven Jericho's monitors to shreds and now was rebuilding them. The three nurses present had tried to stop him, but one look from the Doctor had caused two of them to withdraw and the other to help. This latest assistant, the nurse to his doctor, was called Monica Jeffries. She was a plump, smiling woman with hectic cheeks.

'Tell me, Monica,' said the Doctor, 'what exactly has Dr Greco been doing here?'

'Don't really know,' said Monica. 'We're all agency nurses, called in on Saturday. Don't think this place even existed last week, but they pay

well. We just carry out the obs – Dr Greco seems to know what he's doing.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor grimly, 'doesn't he just.' He pulled wires out of the heart monitor, twisted them into one wire and began attaching them to the cannula on Steven's right hand. 'One more thing, Monica,' he said suddenly,

'I've got no idea what Neil Tennant looks like, but I'd hazard a guess he looks like Dr Greco.'

Monica gave a nervous laugh. 'Funny, Jen said that this morning. Suppose he does.'

Roz asked Monica for coffee, to get rid of her, then she leant in close to the Doctor and helped with the second cannula. In the first rush to prolong Steven's life as soon as they had arrived – pumping his heart with adrenalin, far more than any earthly doctor would ever prescribe – the Doctor had explained the human secrets now interwoven with an alien scheme. 'Winnie Tyler sold her son and he became Steven Jericho. And in separating a psychic gestalt, Winnie condemned one of the boys to death – unless I can prevent it.

One boy would always be stronger, and if you can call Mrs Tyler lucky, then she was lucky in that she kept the strong one. This Jericho family –' and the Doctor had glanced coldly at Thomas, who sat with his head bowed '– they bought the victim. Separated from his brother, poor Steven bled psi-power which Gabriel soaked in. Their separation twisted the symbiosis. In his unconscious mind, Steven yearned to be somewhere else, with his brother. So he projected himself. He drained and wasted his body, seeking the one thing that would complete his mind. The physical distance slowed the rate of feeding, but Dr Greco's put paid to that by bringing Steven here. No coincidence, Roz; it never is. Steven's been calling to Gabriel across the city. Whether Gabriel's realized this, I don't know. He's clever, but apart from his psi-talent, he's just a little boy.' The Doctor had hissed through his teeth in frustration, punching a panel in half. 'I've made many mistakes in this, but thinking Gabriel only possessed a Glamour was idiocy. He's far more powerful, and growing as Steven weakens. Perhaps the Glamour affected me more than I thought, making me 123

think things weren't so dangerous.'

Now, pulling the bedside television's plug apart and steal ing the fuse for the Doctor's cannibalized monitor, Roz said, 'This must be what

the entity's closing in on, the tribophysical creature – psi-powers in distress would send a powerful signal.'

'Actually, no,' said the Doctor, and he turned away so that she could not see his face. 'The signal's strong for these two lads, but otherwise unremarkable.

In trauma, the power would be useless to anyone else. It could maybe turn a windmill, not worth scouring the universe for. Nevertheless, the Gabriel-Steven symbiont would seem to be the focus, that's what puzzles me. There'll be a dozen or so in existence on the planet's surface at any one time. Why pick the one that isn't working? And why psi-powers in the first place? Which came first, the chicken or the egg? I'm only halfway there, Roz.' The Doctor's voice flattened and for once his face hid nothing, as desolate as winter. 'The answers aren't coming fast enough, while everything else accelerates.'

Roz worked silently for a while. Then she said quietly, 'How far back does Dr Greco's involvement go? If Winnie Tyler's scars are proof of experimentation, then the bastard should swing for –'

'No, Roz,' said the Doctor gently. 'There were no experiments. We've been seeing shadows where there are none. Winnie Tyler just passed a gene mutation on to her sons. A natural birth. Beverley and Carl escaped, if they had the same father, while Gabriel and Steven inherited the lot. Winnie's scars aren't proof of conspiracy. They're proof of how she suffered, lost and alone in the Quadrant. Trapped in silence.'

He broke off as Steven spasmed. The Doctor slammed a second hypodermic of adrenalin into his heart, then watched as his patient calmed. 'Something's going on,' muttered the Doctor. 'Gabriel's influence is increasing.'

'D'you want me to go back and find Gabriel?' asked Roz. 'If we bring the boys together –'

'No,' said the Doctor, scrabbling with the jigsaw of circuits, racing now. 'That could make things worse. The gestalt's been corrupted for almost a decade, reunion could be cataclysmic. Stevens been radiating and warping psi-energy on a massive scale – it's like having a leaking radioactive isotope; it doesn't solve the problem to shove a second isotope alongside. Right now, I think we have to keep the Tylers and the Jerichos as far apart as we can, all of them.

Anyone spending too much time with Steven in his illness will be

damaged –

standing next to the isotope, naked.'

'Damaged in what way?'

'In any way. Perhaps inducing latent psi-powers in the onlooker. Prolonged exposure could worsen the effects. We saw in Paris how psi-talents can induce physical metamorphosis. And induce madness. From what Monica says, Mrs 124

Jericho spends all day every day sitting next to her son.'

'Thomas,' said Roz sharply, and she looked up. Thomas had been with her in reception, trying to contact his cousin, Alfred Jericho. She pressed the plug into the Doctor's hand and ran to reception, knowing already that Thomas would be gone.

The Doctor was alone, with the ventilator hissing then hissing again, as Monica Jeffries returned with two mugs of coffee. As she approached, she saw the Doctor step back to look at Steven. The Doctor went from the light of the anglepoise lamp, and shadow surrounded him. In the darkness, Monica could see the gleam in his eye, a cold, turning light. Then she looked at the boy, at the welter of red, cracked skin on his face and his sightless eyes staring at the ceiling above.

'Nice-looking lad, underneath,' she said sadly. The Doctor nodded. Monica had heard some of the Doctor's words, but understood only that Steven was dying. She feared the answer as she asked, 'Does he know what's happening?'

'I hope not,' said the Doctor, his voice heavy. 'He's been tormented all his life. We can only pray there's no conscious thought in that ravaged mind.' He fell silent, and the ventilator hissed, then he asked, 'Have you got children?'

'One,' said Monica. She sat next to the bed and held Steven's hand. 'Just six months. That's why I went private, more money. His name's Callum.'

'Look after him,' said the Doctor.

Dr Greco was packing. He had returned from his briefing session to find a fierce black woman running out of the building, shouting the name of the Jerichos' personal assistant. Alarmed, he had travelled to

the top floor and snapped at the receptionist for an explanation. She had said that there was an emergency on the ward, but another doctor was in attendance. Very quietly, Dr Greco had panicked, scurrying down the side-corridor which took him to his office without traversing the ward. Now, he was stuffing files and floppy disks into his briefcase when a voice said, 'Nice to meet you, Neil. I've been wondering when you'd get back.'

Dr Greco froze, then tried to turn around with dignity, straight-backed. A little man leant against the doorframe, idly twirling a stethoscope, though his eyes were devoid of humour. 'My name isn't Neil,' stammered Dr Greco.

'Irrelevant,' said the little man sharply, and Dr Greco retreated behind his desk as his visitor walked slowly into the office, stalking him.

Dr Greco said, 'You've got no right –' but one look from the little man silenced him.

'I'm the Doctor,' said the Doctor, 'the definite article. Whereas you fall short of the title. It's a title that we earn, Dr Greco, at great cost. Cost,' he raged, then was calm again: 'Not profit.' The Doctor turned the computer screen 125

around to read the documents printed there. He rattled the page-down key at speed – he surely couldn't read that fast and said darkly, 'I've stabilized Steven's condition, not that you're interested. You've been busy in different ways. From the charts, it seems you've done nothing more than PET scans and injections of qualisam and silocynene – just disguising the fact that Steven's coma has worsened since you brought him to the city. As you knew it would.

You're not helping Steven, you're helping yourself.'

Greco wanted only to escape, but his pride would not be affronted. 'I've provided every facility that boy could need. In barely a day at the Frei Institute, Steven's MR images have improved –'

'I'm talking,' thundered the Doctor, and Greco's mouth snapped shut. The blue light of the screen flickered on the Doctor's face as he mused, 'Now let me see. I'd imagine that Steven's medical file has caused some curiosity over the years, it probably fell into your lap. Manna from heaven. Or perhaps you sought it out, perhaps it was exactly what you'd been paid to find. And then, by chance or diligence, you came across Gabriel Tyler. Eight months ago. A little boy troubled by simple appendicitis, but with his face telling a different story, telling

of his kinship to another patient, far away. Then you – and your employers, Dr Greco – set up the experiment.

An experiment designed not to help the Jerichos and the Tylers, but designed simply to watch. To collate the results. Light the blue touchpaper and retire, no matter what the consequences. Science is our privilege, Dr Greco, and you've abused it. For money.'

The Doctor paused. Greco edged round to see that he had stopped at Mrs Jericho's medical file. It was almost blank. Her aversion to doctors was well known, but Greco had not thought to pursue the matter further. Genetically, the woman was unimportant. But this new Doctor, whose name Greco had heard in whispers, seemed to find this interesting. The man was wasting his time – there could be nothing important in a history of miscarriages.

Then the Doctor studied Greco's face, as if chilled by a new thought, saying,

'I don't know who your paymasters are, but there's a certain sense in this.

And that link is our profession. We're both doctors. That makes us part of a Brotherhood, wouldn't you say?'

Greco abandoned his briefcase and ran. The Doctor shouted Roz's name, realized she was downstairs, swore in plain Anglo-Saxon and followed. Greco pushed Monica Jeffries to the floor and ran down the corridor to reception, the Doctor's shout of 'Stop him!' propelling Greco towards the lift.

The receptionist picked up the aspidistra by the stalk, swung and cracked the pot against Dr Greco's skull. He fell to the floor like a sack of sand. The receptionist, fed up with Mrs-can't-even-say-good-morning-Jericho and her servile, snotty doctor, both thinking themselves better and smarter than good 126

working girls, looked down at the prone body. She dusted her palms together, like they do in cartoons.

Five minutes later, with Greco unconscious and tied to a chair, and Monica Jeffries watching improvised machines adding their tick and spin to Steven's ventilator, the Doctor stood at the window and looked at the stretch of night.

The sun persisted at the horizon, dramatizing its peaceful fall with

streaks of crimson. Below the Institute, the city illuminated its resistance against the dark with less style than the New York of two days ago. Headlights arced across the by-pass and disappeared behind the curve of old factories. Behind that, the city centre glittered, and somewhere behind that lay the Quadrant, steeped in black. Roz joined the Doctor and both stared at the landscape. 'The causal loop's drawing into a noose around our necks, Roz. The Brotherhood still exists, and if I thought it benign, then I'm a fool.'

'So what do we do now?'

'It's happening,' breathed the Doctor. 'Out there, it happens.'

Harry Harvey shrank back in terror as his wardrobe continued to stare.

Sylvie's whisper urged him to look closer, deeper, but in crossing over from the hereafter, she must have lost reason. She told him to see things that were not there. Crying, Harry put his hands to his chest, where the stitches had burst open as he scrabbled at the bedroom wall, trying to claw his way out. If he possessed the courage, he would rip the wound further and tear his body in half to end it all. But he was not courageous, had been a coward all his life and now paid the price.

In the wardrobe sat the Devil, invisible.

Sylvie still did not make sense and so Harry wished for the only other who could release him: David, young and feckless David Daniels, despised by Harry from the moment Sylvie first brought him home. Now, there was tiny jewel of clarity in his dementia and he knew – had always known that his loathing for David was born of envy. David was smiling and proud and unbowing to the censure of the outside world. He was never silent, and did the things of which Harry had only dreamt. Harry had stifled those dreams, exorcized them in late-night slobbering, while David celebrated them, carrying them as a banner before him. Harry was born too soon, had missed his chance, had missed it all. Now, all around him, on the streets, on television, everywhere, he saw many Davids, men with men, all smiling, showing their teeth, rejoicing while Harry stayed alone.

In Harry's mind the jewel grew wide, blanching his mind with a searing, Almighty light, telling him, you never loved Sylvie – oh, you liked her, Harry, and she could make enough noise for two, but you married her 'cos you were 127

frightened,, cos you couldn't stop looking at boys in school and men in the street. You knew that one day your own eyes would give you away, your sly, treacherous eyes, then everyone would *know*. So Sylvie, poor, funny Sylvie, you took hold of her life and used it as a cover. You rushed into marriage then sat in your chair and said nothing while Sylvie, fast and clever Sylvie who could have had the best of lives, spent her whole life unloved. No wonder she made so much noise, she couldn't stand the silence –

Harry passed beyond tears. He arched his back and broke his mind, then whimpered David's name. Even the wardrobe flinched at such anguish.

Gabriel Tyler shrank back into the pile of Harry's clothes and cried himself, all the while thinking I'm not here. The spell had never had such power, reaching not just Harry but the Wide World also.

Hide, he had told himself that afternoon, knowing he could make Mr Harvey tuck him away. Mr Harvey had done so, but Gabriel knew the poor old man needed help. Mr Harvey had stared not at Gabriel – *I'm not here* – but at the space Gabriel occupied and had dribbled of demons and monsters. Gabriel had sworn to make Mr Harvey better, as soon as it felt safe outside, but Gabriel knew that the demons and monsters were real. They were coming his way congealed in the shape of a single Witch, so he had told Mr Harvey he was sorry, jammed himself into the wardrobe and maintained his spell.

Things had got worse when the women's voices came, all shouting his name.

Gabriel had concentrated, amazing himself with the idea that he did not need to look a person in the eye for his influence to work. *I'm not here*, he thought at the entire Quadrant, and the voices had ceased.

Outside, the Quadrant was quieter, but not at peace. Mrs Thomas, Mrs Evans, Mrs Skinner and the others had gradually calmed, wondering why the search for Gabriel Tyler was so important. He's not here, they had thought, feeling foolish. If not here, then he's safe at home, behind the locked door of number 41. He must be, or Winnie would be leading the search. One by one, they drifted back to their flats, but the unease continued. They cooked or ate or watched television or held their loved ones, while something niggled at the front of their minds, something forgotten, something crucial. Perhaps it was concern for Gabriel, perhaps it was some knowledge of the catastrophe to come, tainting the evening air.

Gabriel did not relax but kept projecting his charm, with the grim knowledge that the expansion of his gift was at a cost. Its hidden source convulsed and begged Gabriel to stop, but Gabriel could not. He saw the Tower in his mind and wanted to go there, but stopping him, there was the Witch, riding the 128

world with talons sharpened for Gabriel's skin. She was coming, oh yes, she was coming. *I'm not here*, he thought, but she cackled, yes you are, my pretty, I can see you and I'm going to eat you up.

Gabriel wished for food and telly and his mum, and he cried with Mr Harvey.

The soft chime in Mrs Hearn's mind told her that Gabriel Tyler was home, so it was the guilt of nine and a half years which finally brought her to Winnie's door. She knocked, and Winnie came running.

'Is he with you?' said Winnie desperately. 'I keep hearing his voice, he says he's not here – he's with them, isn't he? The family, they're here, Thomas told me. And Bev, she knows, she's always known – Eileen, where's Gabriel?

Where is he? If he sees me, if he knows what I did –'

'He's here,' said Mrs Hearn, surprised by the chill of her own voice. 'You've hidden him away. Just like you did before.' She had come with some notion of reconciliation, but the pain on Winnie's face was identical to the pain of nine and a half years ago. Winnie had stood in her doorway with two newborn boys concealed in the back bedroom. She had asked for Eileen's help. Now Mrs Hearn felt the same disgust, untempered by the passing years.

Winnie looked at her and, slowly, Winnie's mouth opened, staying open in a pathetic howl. She reached for her friend of old. She held out one hand, then another, begging comfort. Mrs Hearn recoiled. She did not step forward. She repeated her words of Christmas Eve 1977: 'I'm sorry, Winnie. You brought this on yourself.'

Mrs Hearn walked away and heard the door softly click shut behind her.

She went to her flat. She made a cup of tea. She sat down. She sipped her tea.

She was a woman resigned to living alone. Married life had lasted from 1921 to 1929 and her husband had promised that, if they took

care, they could wait to have kids in their thirties. Eileen's had been something of a wild youth, but in settling down with Simon Hearn, she made the ordinary mistake of acting out a marriage. The once-wicked Eileen started serving tea and cleaning the corners, just as her mother had done, and impetuosity became a wistful memory, swept away with the dust. The woman Simon Hearn had loved became lost in tasks and lists. Their problems never reached a climax; there were no rows, no fights. Slowly, their marriage chilled, like a cup of tea left on the table to grow cold and form an ugly skin. Then one day, Simon Hearn was gone, before their thirties had been reached. There was no other woman; at least some tart would have made it more bearable for Mrs Hearn. After that, she found no one else. She had not looked. But she had dreamt, could not stop herself dreaming. Even now she wondered about that edgy, honest Doctor and his rare, brilliant smiles. Flirting was easy, as long as 129

it did not demand action. Thought alone could do no harm. Fantasies could not intrude upon her tidy home with its glorious view of sunset. She had lived her life inside her head, and would not change.

Eileen's life had revitalized twenty-two years ago, when she fell into Winnie and Sylvie's company. The teenage Eileen surfaced briefly. Older than her girlfriends, they put her in charge, which Eileen loved. She could plan and organize. Then things had changed and friendship betrayed her. Winnie's story even created a rift between Eileen and Sylvie. The two women could no longer meet without the secret coming along as chaperone. Eileen retreated into her thoughts. She romanticized the tale, making herself the tragic centre.

She loved hinting to the Doctor that she knew all and carried a terrible burden on Winnie's behalf. As her life decayed, she retreated into the sentiment of dead men's poetry, and compensated with small acts of kindness, such as buying little boys chocolate.

Years ago, Mrs Hearn had passed that pivotal moment for those who live alone. She had turned the television set square-on to her chair, rather than angling it towards invisible visitors. She sat there now, facing the screen, not forgiving Winnie Tyler. Mrs Hearn had no children; the woman downstairs had given her child away. Winnie's story would continue, one floor down, but Eileen would do nothing. Closing her eyes, Mrs Hearn caught the drift of fire and smoke from an inferno yet to come.

Of the Quadrant's other significant characters, there is only this: the Leathers sat and counted their money. Business would boom now that

night had come, and prostitution flourished on Mondays. Men were keen to recapture the weekend and make the working week ahead just that bit more bearable. After their raid on the Capper's lock-up, Jack and Irene had already made six hundred quid, ignoring the Capper's advice and selling the coke for fifty quid a gram two quid for the girls, forty-eight for them. For the Leathers, the future was looking fine.

Nearby, Bev Tyler sat by the bins, her cider finished. She was exhausted and drunk, in imitation of her mother; she would have been mortified to know that she was failing asleep in the rubbish, dreaming not of Christmas but a dark space in which monstrous, metallic snakes surged towards the light.

Meanwhile her brother Carl, soon to become important, was buzzing around the rec ground on his mate Beefy's motorbike. He'd told his mother that he was with his mates working on a land reclamation scheme – a harmless lie, which got him out of the flat. He'd been in the doghouse for the past fortnight, and every time he looked at his mum, he saw her Temper itching for release. So he stayed on Beefy's bike, having the time of his life.

* * *

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Not far away, on the edge of the Baxter estate, twenty drunk dealers charged from the party house like berserkers. Chris and David paid attention again, adjusting their clothing, Chris buckling the Doctor's strap together as the men ran to their cars, throttled the engines, yelled at each other, then blistered down the street, one man firing his gun into the air. They were going to war and the Capper's name rang out from their chants. Chris told David to get out – this was getting serious. David refused, saying he wasn't leaving, not now.

'David, if you don't get out I'll punch you unconscious and throw you out,'

said Chris.

'I knew it,' said David to the non-existent person at his side, the recipient of camp jokes. 'They always get like this afterwards.' Then, in truth, he was glad to be pushed out of the passenger seat, knowing that he was wrong, that Chris must be police and that things were getting dangerous.

Pulling away in pursuit of the convoy, Chris shouted, 'Go back to the

Quadrant. Flat forty-three. Tell the Doctor what's happening – *the Doctor*.'

David called out, 'Take care,' but he didn't think Chris beard him. Then he sloped back home, thinking that at least the Baxter estate was safe tonight.

Violence had found another arena, and Chris was driving into its heart.

Beneath this, in the pocket dimension, the Capper grew extra fingers to tinker with primitive, human objects. The troubled machine around him questioned the sheer simplicity of these devices, but admired their efficiency. Humans had a taste for War.

Deeper still in the makeshift core, sensors prepared for override as the vital waveform between two Earth boys corresponded to predictions. The War stratagem was ready. Any inclination that the initial analysis had been wrong, and this species had a right to survive, dissolved in the Capper's bubbling laugh.

Mrs Jericho had driven out of the city to the house which Thomas had arranged for them to rent. She had crept into the kitchen. Alfred must have heard the car, but he didn't come to find her. She had dialled Mrs Grandby, who acted as housekeeper for the house's owners, the Thompsons.

The

Thompsons had gone to Italy for the summer and Mrs Jericho envied them: a family – mother, father, three children – playing in the Mediterranean sun; that's what families, and summers were for. She had told Mrs Grandby not to bother coming in tomorrow, the family would be returning to London, thank you very much. Replacing the receiver, she had taken the phone out of its socket.

Then she had gone to the hall. She could see Alfred standing in the garden, deep in thought. The Voice had said *Al fred Al fred Al fred*, but the Voice could tell her nothing she didn't already know. Nonetheless, she had thanked the Voice for its compliance.

She had studied herself in the mirror and was pleased with what she saw.

She looked fine. Impatient, she had stripped off the gauze bandages which the nurses had placed on her knees and fingers. She had no need of them, the skin underneath was unbroken, of course. For once, her hair was in position, and she kept flick, flick, flicking it to make sure. Then she had gone to the conservatory and had taken the battery out of Alfred's mobile phone. She did not want bankers or doctors or Thomas interrupting them. She needed to be alone with her husband.

Now, Eva and Alfred Jericho sat together and talked. He told her it was over. Thomas seemed to be in trouble, and no doubt the authorities would be coming for the Jerichos' version of events; Eva had to know the truth.

Alfred explained the facts. Mrs Jericho only needed to hear the names and the address once to remember them, and she nodded, flicking her hair back into position after every nod. For some reason, Alfred kept breaking off to enquire after her health. He even said she looked ill, when she knew she looked superb. His eyes kept glancing to her shoes, which she knew to be expensive and well-maintained, soft Italian leather stitched under the sun in which the Thompson family now played. *Three kids three kids three kids*, said the Voice. Mrs Jericho told Alfred to stop looking down and to tell her the rest, although at every sentence she thought, I knew he was going to say that.

Alfred finished, and man and wife sat in silence. Steven had given them nine years of unremitting agony and yet neither was prepared for this moment. They had wept together over each successive specialist's failure and had held Steven in their arms on his good days, pretending and hoping that everything was well, that this thin rag-doll of a boy would one day laugh with them. For all these shared moments, the chasm between the Jerichos could not be crossed now. Silence entered their hearts and grew cold there.

Then for a moment, Eva faltered. To her surprise, she heard herself say quietly, 'Alfred. Oh, Alfred.' She felt tears on her cheeks. Her hair fell forward and she did not care. Even the Voice was silent, maintaining only its heartbeat rhythm, but slowly, in mourning.

Alfred pressed his hands to his temples. If he had moved, if he had gone to his wife and held her, told her that he loved her, things might have been very different. But he was ashamed and did not move. Mrs Jericho was alone.

Forgetting that she had cried, Mrs Jericho said brightly, 'You must be hungry,' and walked to the kitchen.

Chapter 9

Two women stood in their kitchens and considered their knives. Winnie Tyler took the plastic-handled vegetable knife from the drawer; Eva Jericho chose from Sabatier knives slotted into a wooden block.

Eva had decided on sausages and mash, nursery food, nanny food, now considered fashionable in London restaurants. As she whittled the potatoes, gouging out black eyes, she remembered her pregnancy. She remembered the blood. She had lost count of the early miscarriages. *Se ven se ven se ven,* murmured the Voice, then in the mild summer of 1973, she thought the child had taken at last, until October, when a rush of blood brought that child to an end. The Jerichos despaired, until Eva decided that nothing lasting could be built on sorrow. They would have to look elsewhere.

Winnie thumbed the red plastic handle, remembering its grip, the ease with which it turned, and she remembered the day everything changed. It's twins, Mrs Tyler, the girl had said, smiling, thinking it good news. Winnie sat in the corridor, waiting to see the doctor and thinking of abortion, when the tall man approached her. He said he had been waiting for her. His name was Thomas.

He had a deal which could make them both very happy.

Eva sliced half the onion – wondering why it made some people cry, she would do no such thing, would never cry again – then dotted the baking tray with grapeseed oil, put the Cumberland sausages and onion slices on top and slid the tray into the Aga's top oven. Then she put the potatoes on the boiling-plate, and paused, thinking of the social worker: a nice young man, well-dressed, always smiling, and damning her.

Applying for adoption should have been simple. Alfred employed Bannerman & Crew to scythe through the red tape. She would have a child by the new year, and she looked ahead, already planning the glorious family Christmas of 1974. But when the Jerichos were turned down as adoptive parents, Eva Jericho knew that Eva Dalloway haunted her still. She had a criminal record. *Sal Hunt Sal Hunt Sal Hunt,* said the Voice, gaining strength. The adoption procedure involved checking police records. One reckless moment in her youth labelled her Unfit Mother. Her wealth and charity were masks

concealing the shoplifter underneath. The thought crucified her as Bannerman & Crew swung into action, appealing against the decision, and losing.

Mrs Jericho would have no child. The social worker had decided that she 133

was as sly as common shopgirls, slatterns who would breed and breed again, surrounding themselves with dirty, wild urchins in squalid, nicotine slums; everyone could have children, every idiot girl capable of ovulation, everyone except Eva.

Bannerman & Crew advised the Jerichos to apply for a private adoption, but this would involve going to court and the files being opened again, the files branding her a criminal. *Un fit un fit un fit,* the Voice pulsed in her abdomen.

Sally Hunt, wherever she was in the world, surely laughed.

Slowly, with something turning to stone in her heart, Eva realized that she could still prosper, and in the process, make use of the common herd she now abhorred.

Winnie saw her eyes reflected in the knife. Her mascara had blurred into dark patches, her Badger eyes. Panda eyes, her husband yelled one night, it's pandas, not badgers, you can't even get a joke right, you ignorant cow.

Her tears first started when Thomas made his proposal. He reasoned with such sense, such sadness, telling Winnie it had taken him years to find a woman like her. This was Providence. Winnie, he said, your husband is gone and there are wolves at the door. Your children can't be fed, can't be clothed, you're damning them all. One new child is bad enough, two completes your disaster. Your own body is damning you. They'll be taken from you, Winnie, they'll be taken into care, Carl and Beverley and the twins. In trying to have it all, you'll end up with nothing. Don't be greedy, give someone else a chance, and think of one child growing up with money and prospects, while the children you keep will be free of debt.

Eva fried the rest of the onion, transferring it to the simmering-plate. As the strips became brown and translucent, she added a pinch of sugar to help them caramelize. Then she opened the top oven, blinking in the rush of dry heat. She turned the sausages and sealed the Aga once more. Everything was cooking; she could wait, as she had waited for the right woman from winter 1974 to winter 1977

while her tight smile calcified in its composure.

It'll happen, she told herself. Her husband's money would ensure it and the Jerichos would be a proper family at last. She even felt phantom pains, at night, as her child grew closer.

Winnie picked up the larger knife, which she had never dared to use. It gleamed in the kitchen's electric light, shining with promise. She told Thomas no, over and over again, while a darker voice inside said yes. Even as she fended off Thomas's night-time visits, she accepted his small, dripfeed pay-ments. As the months passed, she watched the bills mounting up and fought with the loan sharks who shouted her husband's name and demanded restitution. The debt must be paid, they told her, and the name of Tyler is on our list – any Tyler will do. The poison-snake-thought crept into her mind: that 134

one of her children need not be a Tyler, could have a different, better name.

She still kept quiet, denying what she was about to do even as she took Thomas's gifts, signing off from her doctor to have antenatal tests at the private hospital. Part of her mind began to close, cutting off its blood supply and withering. She denied the twins' existence, telling one and all that she carried a single child. She wore huge jumpers, even in the Indian-summer autumn, and threaded the button of her skirts with elastic. Most people saw only a harassed, debt-ridden, pregnant woman. They left her alone, allowing friends to close the trap.

Eileen Hearn and Sylvie Harvey knew; they looked close and guessed the truth. After the Quadrant's Guy Fawkes bonfire, Winnie drank too much wine – trying to damage the burden inside and take her choice away, oh yes –

and she sobbed out her story. Eileen and Sylvie were furious, outraged, despis-ing Thomas, but once they saw that Winnie was considering the deal, they sat in silence and friendship perished. Children had been denied to Eileen, and Sylvie had never wanted kids. Now the childless sat in judgement. Their condemnation only trapped Winnie further. They could never be friends again, and yet this confirmed that Winnie could not turn back. Thomas's proposal became the rocks on to which Winnie would fling herself.

She thought she could do it. She looked at Beverley and Carl, at the poor shoes on their feet and the pitying glances of mothers at the

school gate, and Winnie resolved to escape. Thomas's money would buy them freedom, they'd move to Bristol or Bath, somewhere nice, a place beyond the accusing eyes of former friends.

Eva put the grilled sausages into the lower oven to keep warm, put the first onions with the second, added some potato water and stock to the saucepan and made good, old-fashioned gravy, burnt-brown and spiced with salt. She was calm, now, remembering the Christmas Eve panic. Apparently, the woman – Eva didn't know her name, didn't want to know anything about her, the child was and always had been Eva's – took fright; only hours after giving birth, she fled the private hospital with Steven and locked herself in her home. Thomas had been dispatched with more money, and Thomas returned with the goods at three o'clock on Christmas morning.

Eva's was an immaculate conception, and the Jerichos played on Christmas Day with their boy – so perfect, almost *glowing*, not even crying, though by Boxing Day he was fretful, turning and turning to look at his right. Everything had been planned. Eva had spent the autumn in seclusion so that no one would see that her figure remained unaltered. She did not say she was pregnant, but hinted, and others respected her privacy, remembering her earlier scares. The Jerichos locked themselves away until the New Year, then Eva and Steven flew to Italy, to the seclusion of the house in the Alto Adige, to return 135

in the late summer of 1978 so that one and all could see her precious boy, born abroad.

As Eva stepped from the plane, back on British soil, she thought Steven unwell, suddenly. Thomas was driving her home to the admiring gaze of family and friends, when Steven had his first convulsion. Thomas detoured to the hospital. Then the illnesses came, not as single spies but in battalions.

Winnie held her fist behind her head, and the knife pressed against the sagging flesh of her underarm, finding its home between the old, white scars. For nine and a half years, Winnie had suffered her loss. She had named the child Peter, but could not find him. All the numbers and addresses Thomas had given her during the pregnancy turned out to be rented offices, now abandoned with no forwarding address.

Even before this discovery, Winnie knew she had been bought and cheated.

On Christmas night, in a stupor of Cointreau, Winnie made her resolution and the scarring began. She cut open her arm: her punishment, the pain she deserved. She watched the blood ball and then flow, trickling down to her elbow and dotting the kitchen floor.

She knew, then. She knew that money is blood; Thomas's money, Peter's blood. The money was infected and would disease the children she still possessed. She would not, could not spend it. Beverley, Carl and Gabriel, especially Gabriel, could never prosper from the tainted £30,000 – and Thomas had been clever on Christmas Eve, raising the money to that amount, a tripli-cate of ten. All Winnie could do, until her death, was protect her children from the blood money – The kids would be free of that shameful inheritance – no presents, no feasts, no dining on their brother's blood. Winnie's life was lost but she would cause her children to survive. Every once in a while when the memories or the alcohol got too much, she would notch this oath on hidden flesh.

Eva mashed the potatoes, adding milk, butter, black pepper and a sprinkling of nutmeg, and she enjoyed the feel of the potato pulping and spreading beneath the masher. Grinding and thumping the food, she thought of nine and a half years' misery which could have been prevented. Thomas and her quiet, loving, lying husband had never told her, never told her that the woman had twins, that those were the only conditions under which they could arrange the sale. Eva had wasted her life at hospital bedsides, unaware that a perfectly good replacement was on the rack, waiting for exchange two hundred miles to the north. Now coincidence, blessed coincidence had brought her to shop, but not before the meal was done.

She considered the man who would relish this food. Alfred, the epitome of politeness. A kind, grave man, a wonderful host and a financial genius, a husband who would relieve his wife's burdens by insisting that he spoke alone 136

with the specialists upon each one's arrival, taking them behind locked doors to tell them the facts, and no doubt slipping a cheque into their hands to buy their silence. Nine and a half years and Eva had never known what was going on. She stirred a dollop of cream into the mash.

Winnie pressed the knife and her skin broke anew. Bleeding, she looked at the empty Cointreau bottle which lay at the back of the cupboard still, a reminder of that night. On Boxing Day, she wrote one cheque from the account, to pay off the loan sharks. Then she ripped

up the cheque book and destroyed any evidence that the account had ever existed. She would earn money herself. She would work all night, stuffing charity leaflets into envelopes, her fingers stinging from paper cuts. She would clothe and feed the children and keep the wolf from the door, with no need of Thomas and the family.

After that Christmas, Winnie gradually sought the knives less and less, and her energies went into the children instead. She knew now that she had bullied them over the years. She watched their every move, warning them off strangers and crime and drugs, telling them about sex, making it sound scary.

Winnie depicted the world as hostile and brutal, preparing and arming her children. Beverley, Carl and Gabriel would survive the Quadrant and prove that money was not their salvation. She would let them hate their mother, her nagging, her suffocation. She would even let them see her drinking, so that they would despise her and, as a consequence, make their lives cleaner.

Now she wondered, did she stifle them with her guilt? Would Carl, Beverley and Gabriel be cleverer, funnier, braver without her oppression?

And it had all been for nothing. The lie pervaded everything; Beverley had seen her, had always known, had hated her mother for all these years, and kept a silence every bit as cancerous as her mother's.

Winnie's only comfort had been that somewhere, Peter grew tall and strong.

Now, Thomas had destroyed that hope. Peter decayed in a miserable half-life.

Tonight, the knives would flick and stab again, and she need not be careful, could cut deeper. The story was out, her children would be taken from her, and Winnie could die.

Eva put the sausages and mash on china plates, poured out the gravy in *nouvelle-cuisine* pools, then went to the scullery for the extra-special ingredient. The path was clear, now, and she could go shopping as soon as Alfred had eaten. She took the powder and sprinkled it on the mash, disguising it with more nutmeg. Then carefully, she dipped her finger in the powder and smeared it along the underside of each sausage. Finally, abandoning care, she sprinkled more powder all over the meal and announced that dinner was served. She walked into the dining room, breathing in steam from the hot plates, and leaving the

box of rat poison in the kitchen. It stood next to the 137

oven gloves, which she had not used once.

Winnie had taken the largest knife and was wondering how much pressure it would take to pierce her gut when Carl came home. He sauntered in and walked past the kitchen without looking at her, answering an unspoken question: 'No, before you start, I haven't been in trouble, I've been with Beefy.'

Then he asked if there was any tea left, and without waiting for an answer, he went to his room. He knew he was still in the doghouse and would stay in his room until called. He started playing his Bon Jovi tapes, loud.

Carl saved his mother's life. Winnie had a son who was hungry. She began to mop up the blood with a kitchen towel; she had not bled much, had drained any excess many years ago. Her face dull, she looked around the kitchen, wondering what to cook. Numbly, she thought of a meal for four, imagining that if she kept up the pretence of normality, she could summon up the real thing. Gabriel and Beverley would be joining Carl for tea.

Eva had no son to walk in and ask for food. No one stopped her walk to the dining room, and if the Voice in her head now said *stop Mum stop Mum stop Mum,* she paid it no attention.

Alfred would not eat. He kept on talking, unashamed of his tears. Even so, he broke off to tell her nonsense, claiming that she had cut herself on the knives and burnt her hands on the ovens. It could not be true. She felt nothing.

Alfred was losing his mind. Again and again, he told her that he had not been at fault – if Eva imagined that the twin could have helped to cure Steven, then she was wrong. Thomas had checked the Tylers' medical records many times and found nothing of use. Furthermore, they had frozen Mrs Tyler's placenta and umbilical cord, cultivating stem cells from the cord blood – no need to extract them from the twin – but all to no avail.

Mrs Jericho interrupted her husband, politely, using the voice she used for idiots in shops. The problem was simply that she hadn't been told Steven was one of a pair. Now that she knew, the solution was simple – legal, in fact. The original purchase had not complied with fair trading. The goods were faulty.

They could be taken back. None of this would have happened if Alfred had told her the conditions of sale in the first place.

Many things crossed Alfred Jericho's face in that moment, and she wondered why he became so angry. 'You *ordered* us,' he raged, a voice so unlike his usual manner. 'You said again and again that you wanted to know nothing of the woman, not a scrap, not her name, where she lived, nothing – only that she was white and Anglo-Saxon. Dear God, Eva, I feared for your state of mind even then. You talked like you were pregnant, even to me, like the child was actually yours. You even felt pain. Spent Christmas Eve in agony until the child arrived.'

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Mrs Jericho could barely hear her own words. 'But it did hurt. It hurt so much. I can feel it now, Alfred, here –'

He spoke over her, almost shouting. 'I broke the law for you, Eva. There were children abroad we could have taken with no comeback – there are countries swimming with black-market babies, they're giving them away, but that wasn't good enough for you, no, you insisted –'

'Mrs Jericho wanted to buy British,' someone sneered. Mrs Jericho turned round and saw Thomas walk in. He seemed different, somehow. The usual Thomas was a discreet, slippery man, though Mrs Jericho suspected this to be a pretence; she heard him laughing with the kitchen girls, and sometimes caught him eyeing her legs. Underneath it all, he was one of the stupid. He had no qualifications and had been saved by dint of his being Alfred's cousin.

Alfred employed him out of pity, though Thomas's cunning had been a useful tool.

Now, Thomas was energized and would not stop. He loped around the room as if he owned it, pouring whisky from the decanter and saying they'd all go to prison; they'd been found out and the police would be coming. He turned to Eva, vicious. 'Of course we never told you, Mrs Jericho – it took for ever to find a Winnie Tyler, but if you'd known it was twins, what would you have done? You'd have said no. That precious bloody baby had to be yours and yours alone. No copies. You'd run out the room if someone had the same dress as you, never mind an identical *child*.'

Mrs Jericho did not listen. She only wanted him to shut up so that Alfred could finish his meal. She asked Thomas to be quiet. She was a little shocked when he leant over the table and hissed in her face: 'I've

spent eighteen years being quiet for you, keeping your secrets and doing what I'm told. Now you can listen to me, lady. I'm going to sing like a bird if it saves my neck, Eva Jericho, and your name's first on the list –'

Thomas broke off because her dinner knife had entered his chest. He staggered, swayed, somehow kept his balance. Tired of this, Mrs Jericho used her fork. It was surprisingly difficult, she noted, to enter a fork into the ribcage.

Three stabs did the job. Then she returned to her position, facing Alfred from the opposite end of the table. She straightened her skirt and said, 'Now, where was I? Alfred, your meal is getting cold. It's not often I cook. I really would eat it, if I were you.'

Alfred was howling and shuddering. He shrank back from his plate in horror, at last understanding. He looked at his wife and begged her, girlish tears and snot flooding his face. The fork glistened in her hand, Thomas's blood pooling on her wrist. 'Eva,' gasped Alfred, 'oh my sweet Eva, what have I done to you? What have I done?'

She tapped the fork on the mahogany and Alfred had no choice but to eat.

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He swallowed once, retched and then hastened, because she demanded it, tapping her fork like a metronome in time with the Voice, *no Dad no Dad no Dad.* Gulping in air and his chest heaving with moans, Alfred shovelled mashed potato into his mouth and dribbled it down his chin, gravy mingling with tears. Once, he paused, looked at her, then continued to eat as if, at last, he wanted the food. The words were muffled, but she knew them: 'Eva, I love you, Eva, I love you,' over and over again. The strychnine silenced him. He convulsed, his back snapping into an impossible curve, arms and legs splaying out. For a second, he looked like a scarecrow – albeit a happy one, as his face muscles contracted into a sardonic grin.

The spasms continued as Mrs Jericho stood, ready to leave, flicking her hair into position. She was glad of her iron composure in these difficult circumstances, and relieved that she would not have to clean the room. Mrs Grandby could handle that. Now, having been postponed since 5.00 a.m., the shopping expedition could begin.

Turning to go, Mrs Jericho paused. There was someone else in the room.

She stood on the far side, where the mirror had been; and such a woman.

She was feral, bleeding, and weeping more than any woman could weep. Mrs Jericho heard the screams, but distantly, under the rocking of Alfred's chair.

This woman seemed to be crying that she had loved Alfred, wanted nothing but the pain and the Voice to stop, the ceaseless, godless Voice which was driving her insane. The woman even looked at the plates, at Mrs Jericho's uneaten meal, knowing that for some reason, *two* servings of rat poison had been prepared.

Slowly, sadly, Mrs Jericho turned her back on the pitiful soul and walked from the room.

Chapter 10

Only the anglepoise lamp at Steven's bedside illuminated the ward. The long, low room seemed to stretch beyond the window into the night outside. Dr Greco lay slumped in his chair, probably conscious but pretending otherwise.

The other two nurses had been sent home. 'Lock your doors,' the Doctor had said, 'just in case,' while the receptionist had resigned, storming off to get drunk. Only plump Monica Jeffries remained, and she rubbed cream into Steven's feet. Subconsciously, she was breathing in time with the ventilator.

The Doctor had been standing at the window for a long while, and Roz knew from experience that he did not want to be disturbed. Now, she walked up behind the Doctor, to tell him that the rapid production of gamma hydroxybutyrate in Steven's body had peaked and his sleep was peaceful, though not safe.

The Doctor gave a cynical smile. 'In its artificial form, mass-produced gamma hydroxybutyrate is known as liquid Ecstasy. I've turned Steven's body into a drugs factory. But the substance I need is out there. The cocaine. I've been leisurely, Roz, and too distracted unravelling the strands weaving the Tylers and the Jerichos together. If only someone in the Quadrant had *said*.'

For a moment, he brightened, though the heavy brow remained severe. 'Fifty years ago on this planet, Sapir and Whorf hypothesized

that language is a trap, that we're at the mercy of our words. I wish I'd told them. Silence is the killer.'

Roz could not let it go unsaid: 'You do the same yourself, Doctor. Keep secrets. Sometimes I think you live in silence, and we're just distractions.'

'Yes,' he said wearily. 'Yes, I know.'

She left a pause, then said, 'And you're doing it now. What's in that cocaine?'

He turned back to the window, studying the spectral Doctor reflected there, the city's lights glimmering through its outline. 'I think I know. I didn't at first, it could have been many things. There are plenty of races in this galaxy in need of psychics. The Tregatorian Empire collects them every once in a while, makes them slaves to their Economic Architects. All so they can predict the rise and fall of the share index. And every fourth season, the priests sail from Sant's World to harvest and burn the Gifted, because their gods demand it.'

'But it's none of those?'

'I don't think so. Not dating from the Time of Legend. I couldn't have known 141

until I discovered Steven here.' He broke off, looked down at his shoes, then seemed to go off at a tangent. 'It strikes me, Roz, that Gabriel Tyler has been draining his brother's life force. Like a vampire.'

Then the Doctor said no more, so Roz said uselessly, 'Yeah?'

'Yeah,' echoed the Doctor.

'So as soon as Chris gets the cocaine, the fight begins. . . ?'

'Oh no,' and this time the Doctor really smiled. 'As soon as Chris gets the cocaine, it'll all be over. Simple as that.' Dispelling the solemn mood, the Doctor walked to Steven's bed, smiled at Monica and tinkered with the cannibalized monitor. He mused, 'Of course, when I sent Chris out, the twin symbiosis was still buried in the unspoken. So I didn't tell him to hurry.'

'His mobile's still switched off,' said Roz. 'I'll keep trying.'

Chris crouched in the dark and listened to the men swear and shout and run out of steam, tired of calling the Capper's name to thin air.

He had followed them to the east side of the Baxter estate, barely needing to conceal his surveillance. The hunting pack would have rocketed past police, soldiers, vicars, not caring who saw them. As the convoy scorched into Crimea Street, Chris had tried phoning the flat – no reply – then he stashed the phone in his jacket as the cars in front had braked, skewing across the road, and the men had charged into a lock-up built into the railway arch. Chris had parked at a distance, then tried to find another entrance. Within two minutes, he had struck lucky. A small door on the opposite side had been forced open, then propped shut to disguise the intrusion – the clumsy work of some amateur burglars. Chris had crept through a small, makeshift kitchen and into the arch.

Even for one used to travel by TARDIS, he was surprised by the lock-up's internal space. The central square of flat tarmac was heightened by pillars of cardboard boxes: video players, CDs, food mixers, personal computers and printers, televisions, sex toys, all manner of electrical goods from the Capper's second industry. Now, Chris crouched behind a stack of oil drums, careful to keep quiet as the men's rage simmered.

Then his mobile phone rang.

Twenty drunk, armed men reached into their jackets to take the call. Then twenty drunk, armed men realized it wasn't their phone and looked at the oil drums. Chris fumbled for the phone, but the pocket was deep. The click of twenty safety catches scattered across the lock-up –

Whitish-blue light shivered across twenty faces. Miniature lightning bolted up to the vaulted roof then rebounded to the far wall, where the air bulged and burst, disgorging the Capper into the three-dimensional world.

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Twenty guns opened fire. The Capper lost his left cheek, chin and both legs – the men aimed at the kneecaps especially, saluting the Capper's nickname. Then, in the ensuing silence, his hips and shoulder blades divided into complicated incisors which repaired the damage as the Capper mocked them.

'Hello, boys.'

The shooting began again, the men's swearing and screams louder than the reports. Craning to get a better view, Chris fumbled with the phone and buttoned it to receive. He heard Roz say his name but he hissed, 'Shut up!'

After the guns had been fired and reloaded and fired and reloaded, an eerie calm descended upon the lock-up. The men stared as the Capper rebuilt himself with the tender caress of tentacles, giggling and waving a rotting finger at them. 'Naughty, naughty.' Then he opened his mouth and the light of his throat blazed across the space. Somehow he could still talk, a replication of the Capper's voice booming from his chest. The ribs opened like vertical jaws to reveal organs and metal churning in a maelstrom of blood. Some men fell to their knees, some started praying. The Capper thundered, 'I offered you the big time, boys. And your infant minds couldn't look beyond ruling the neighbourhood. Well, it's happening without you, fellas, so you'd better make way. I've got life beyond life and I'm gonna live it. And you're paying.'

Chris moved around the oil drums, keeping the phone line open as the Capper named each of the men gathered there, recounting favours he had done them, drunken nights they had spent together, magnificent scams they had pulled off, girlfriends of theirs he had screwed. Then he listed in graphic detail what he would do to their mothers. Chris could hear men weeping in fear. High above, he could see thin, Capper tendrils swaying in the air, poised to strike. He heard the clatter of a gun falling to the floor and feet breaking into a run. A tendril whipped down. There came the sound of slicing meat.

'Oh, Charlieee,' sing-songed the Capper. 'Don't go to pieces on me.' Then the Capper roared, telling the men they had been friends and, better still, business associates, but now trading would cease. He seemed to be building to his climax as Chris steadied himself against a drum, gripping the surface, feeling the wires beneath his palm; the wires which snaked from the drums to the floor, where they entwined with rococo, alien whorls of metal, even now being reeled into the Capper's torso. Chris looked from the Capper to the drums, then back to the Capper.

'Shit,' said Chris, and he threw himself out of the door.

'The future starts now,' declaimed the Capper, his voice joining with the roar of an approaching train above, 'and it's starting without you. Here it comes, boys. *The Big Time!* '

Chris charged out of the archway and ran and ran and ran.

He was lifted off his feet as the lock-up became solid light then rolled into 143

flame and wind and noise. The Capper's drums of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil gutted the arch, slamming the lock-up into splinters. The viaduct shuddered and held, but the train above jumped from the track. Chris landed, tumbled along the ground as burning timbers skittled around him and boxes of porn videos slammed to earth. Instantly he looked back, hearing the screams of distressed metal, then he was running again.

Directly above, the fifteen-carriage Inter-City 125 was still going at speed, bringing late commuters home from London, but it scraped along the railings on top of the viaduct, and even now, the railings peeled away, struts snapping like cotton and the brickwork flying apart. Maintaining its velocity, the vehicle tilted and plunged to an unscheduled stop. For the second time, Chris threw himself along the ground. Behind him, it seemed the disaster would never end as the crash happened again and again. The engine slammed to earth and fell apart, while the following carriages broke free, falling down but pressing on, continuing their journey sideways against tarmac, streaming with sparks as they ploughed into terraced houses, demolishing them. The chaos only lessened at the rear, where the last links of the chain separated, tumbling from the bridge with ponderous grace, hulks rolling in slow motion then bursting open like plywood. Chris leapt behind a stack of tyres as huge chunks of shrapnel bowled through the air. The tyres were swept away under the impact, and Chris cartwheeled with them. Decorating the entire scene, a fountain of sparks and bricks rained down from the track above. The night seemed to shrink back as yellow flames illuminated the catastrophe.

Chris blinked, looked up, realized he was still alive and heard the Doctor shouting his name from the phone, but he could only stare as the Capper strode from the fire and straddled the train.

The Capper was transformed, now nine metres tall on legs elongated with ceramic struts, complex secondary arms sprouting to welcome the night air and his head sweeping low on a new, multi-jointed neck, probing the devastation. Cries for help could be heard from the shattered compartments. Oil drums slow to explode now caught up with their peers and flame belched into the open carriages. Chris could see people hammering against unbroken glass as they burnt. Some climbed out, screaming, and they screamed again as they met

their host. The Capper loomed above them and enjoyed his work, cheese-cutter wires whipping out from his body and whittling through the survivors.

The Capper's mind was a frenzy of delight and the machine marvelled at the sheer strength of emotion. If it were capable of simulating love in its parlia-ment of processors, then it loved this man now. It opened up deep reserves to let the Capper find more space, as lovers do. There was such satisfaction in 144

destruction; the War archive said nothing of this glory. Some boring security defaults had suggested slipping between the interstices to avoid the explosion, but the Capper wanted to stride the inferno, just as he had wanted to rise from the grave. The physical act was so much more gratifying than the tribophysical alternative, proof that he was still the Capper and still alive. He had walked from fire twice. He was immortal. Now, he could watch others burn.

Chuckling, he played with his toy train, extending a leg here, three arms there, daintily picking his way through the conflagration. He heard the passengers' fear and thought it only fair to put them out of their misery, white scum who would not have given the old Capper the time of day. He giggled as he invented different ways of reaching into the train's skeleton and snapping the necks of those who cowered there.

Then, above the roar of the fire and the screams for help, he heard someone shouting. Someone unafraid, someone who knew his name. He looked up to see a pretty white boy running through the black smoke, yelling at the Capper to stop. This one, the Capper decided, would be fun.

He towered above the boy, fixing him with his throat-light. The intertrigo fizzed along his left arm, allowing the dimensional shunt of an intricate new killing-arm, all revolving blades and chomping teeth, sheathed in bottle-grown human skin. He swung the arm, testing it and enjoying the man's terror. The idiot was still gabbling into his mobile phone, talking ten to the dozen. Then he reached inside his T-shirt, ripping it open like the Capper was some queerboy. What man could be tempted by flesh, now that he could grow his own?

Then something sparked and blinked around the man's chest, and the Capper felt pain. Instantly, a greater awareness surrounded his thoughts. The Capper struggled, scared of the reminder that he was a tiny part of something bigger, stronger, more important – there had

been too much of that in his first life. Nevertheless, survival routines bludgeoned their way into the central intelligence, with the priority to save the machine at all costs. The creature felt the rupture along the dimensional wall. It was being separated from the hull.

The Capper-part lashed out, swinging the twelve-foot arm at the man's head, but the extension crackled before reaching its victim and stopped, burning with the light of the intertrigo. The arm juddered then shot back to the Capper of its own volition. Analysis had already been made. The device strapped around the man's torso was forcing cohesion, jamming the interstices and threatening dimensional closure. The machine thought of growing longer legs to rise above the interference, but could pull no more material through the gap, nor convert the three-dimensional material already existing.

Alarms warned that it was losing structural integrity. Logic circuits knew the 145

species which had shaped the man's device, and thought this betrayal.

With the Capper screaming his rage, the creature stepped back over the train and nestled against the charred arch, internal systems lost in a vertig-inous reel. It rerouted power from one bank to another, struggling to reach optimum efficiency. The man reappeared. He had battled through the car-nage, then used the train's vertical metal base as a climbing-frame. He kept his eyes fixed on the Capper and all the while he was shouting into his mobile phone. The Capper retreated through the arch and the man followed.

'Keep after it,' shouted the Doctor, 'You've only got a range of fifteen metres.

Chris's voice began to distort, and Roz yelled over the Doctor's shoulder,

'Are you all right?'

The phone crackled some more, then Chris's voice rang out, 'Sorry, we were just going under a bridge.'

The Doctor shoved the phone into Roz's hand, muttering, 'I'm not saving the world over the phone. Monica, have you got a car?'

Monica nodded, and with no further prompting threw him the keys. 'Red Mini,' she said, 'out front.'

The Doctor said quickly, 'Roz, keep an eye on Steven. If his temperature goes up, give him intravenous cortisol – '

'Monica can do that,' snapped Roz. 'I'm coming with you.'

'Roz, please,' said the Doctor quietly. 'That machine's damaged, it's acting out some distorted version of the Capper's life. I've got to help Chris and I don't want both of you in danger. You can help me best by staying with Steven.' Then, as he ran towards the lifts, his voice echoed off the walls. 'One day, Roz, you'll look back on this as the good times.'

Roz turned back to the ward furious. With a yell, she punched the tiles.

'Cup of tea?' said Monica Jeffries, quietly. Then both women looked out of the window at the city. Far away to the east, they could see the glow of the first fire.

The Doctor raced out of the building, threw himself into the car and drove off.

For five minutes, the tower block and the surrounding factories lay silent in the warm night air, the train crash too distant to disturb the tranquillity Then Mrs Jericho arrived.

The far side of the viaduct was comparatively free of debris. Chris only had to step over drug dealers' carcasses. He followed the lurching Capper, pushing the creature back with the device's transmission field.

Around them, the first three streets of the east Baxter estate were on fire, and people came running from their houses, first yelling for help, then praying 146

to God as they saw the hellspawned Capper. At the far end of Crimea Street, a police car squealed to a halt. Another drove up from the opposite direction and almost collided with the Capper. The policeman and policewoman inside did not have time to react as the killing arm scythed low, removing the car roof and their heads.

Chris ran forward, shouting, and the creature fell back. Tentacles shot from the Capper's spine to prise open a manhole. The cover frisbeed past Chris's head. For a second, he thought the machine was retreating into the dimensional tuck as it sank into the ground. Then its mass squirmed, folded, and it plopped into the sewers. 'Sewers again,' muttered Chris. As he followed, he was aware that the sash of circuits

was beginning to heat up and small but alarming wisps of smoke were curling around his face.

The remaining policemen radioed news of the atrocity to Control. The emergency services converged on the Baxter estate, but the secondary information, the story of a thirty-foot human-mechanical hybrid, was diverted to those who would make sense of it and respond. Across the country, human war machines, with experience of this sort of encounter, were put on red alert and turned towards the city.

Roz heard Dr Greco say, 'Good God. Mrs *Jericho*. . . ?' She turned round and looked at the woman who had entered the ward.

Roz realized how much of events she and the Doctor had missed. This was a travesty of the Mrs Jericho Monica had described. Her dress was streaked with blood and her palms were open blisters. Black scabs hardened around her knees and the tips of her fingers where the nails had been tom off. Her feet dragged in shabby gym shoes. Her face was hollow and wretched and she was tormented by a twitch; her head flicked and flicked again, with such severity that she must surely be causing herself pain. And yet when she spoke, her voice was polite, civilized, as though she had just stepped off a yacht. 'Excuse me,' said Mrs Jericho, 'I know it's after hours, but I've come for my son.'

Roz had thought she would be ready for this woman, with fine words prepared to cut through her cosy, domestic lie. Now, Roz felt only pity, recalling her own words to Chris: none of us is a parent, so what do we know?

She remembered a time long ago in the future when her sister's child, Gugwani, had been stricken with Monroe's Cachexia. It lasted only a fortnight and Roz had grown bored with Leabie's calls, each one detailing the rise and fall of Gugwani's temperature. The kid was getting better, so what did it matter?

Mothers made such a fuss, she had muttered to herself.

Now, nagged by guilt, Roz considered that no matter what lay ahead, Mrs Jericho had suffered enough. She had no need of Roz's wrath. Roz called for 147

Monica then approached Mrs Jericho carefully. 'Steven's all right,' said Roz gently. 'We've stabilized his condition. I've got a friend, the Doctor. If anyone can save Steven's life, it's him.' Mrs Jericho looked lost for a moment, her eyes wandering around the room as if she did not know where she was. Then she looked at the bed and her voice

was small. ‘Steven,’ she said, though she did not cry.

‘Sit down,’ said Roz. ‘We’ll get those cuts seen to.’ She made the mistake of turning away to find a chair. Dr Greco’s shout came too late. She turned back to see that Mrs Jericho had picked up the gutted television set, swinging it down on to Roz’s head.

Greco went on shouting but Mrs Jericho ignored him, walking to the bed. She rolled up her sleeves, then began pulling the tubes and wires from Steven’s body. Blood, plasma and saline solution jetted on to her skirt but she did not seem to notice or care. Dr Greco thought that she was humming to herself.

Then she scooped Steven into her arms – he weighed less than four stone –

and walked out of the ward, holding her head high but jerking at the twitch’s command.

The kitchen was at the other side of the top floor, so Monica Jeffries did not hear the noise at first. When she came running down the corridor, a cup of tea slopping in her hand, she took a good ten seconds to perceive this apparition as Mrs Jericho. Steven sagged in his mother’s arms, his skin peeling under her grip, the open hole from the cannula dripping yellowish fluid. Monica dropped the cup on the floor. It shattered. The two women faced each other, both breathing hard. Little Monica Jeffries was all that stood between Mrs Jericho and the lift.

‘Mrs Jericho,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t. You’re hurting him.’

‘This was your idea,’ said Mrs Jericho. ‘This morning. You told me to shop.’

Then she shifted her son’s weight so that she could look into his blind, dry face. In that moment, her cold stare seemed to melt; beneath her impassive mask, something broke free and surfaced, making her eyes liquid. ‘I have to,’

said Mrs Jericho softly. ‘Don’t you see? We have to be happy. That’s the point.

I can make us all happy. All the children and all the mothers, they’ve suffered enough. Please. Get out of my way.’

Monica felt stronger. ‘Let’s get him back to bed, shall we? No one

needs to know, Mrs Jericho, I won't tell. We'll get him tucked up and better, and you can look after him.'

' *Monica,* ' pleaded Mrs Jericho, and Monica froze. She didn't remember telling Mrs Jericho her name. Perhaps it had been overheard on the ward, but somehow Monica knew that the woman had looked into her eyes and plucked 148

the name from her mind. Mrs Jericho whispered sadly, 'If you try to stop me, I'll kill you. I will have to kill you.' Mrs Jericho took one step forward, and the nurse saw Roz's body spreadeagled across the mouth of the ward.

Monica began to cry, terrified, but still she would not move. 'I *can't,* ' she cried. 'I'm here to look after him.'

A single tear fell down Mrs Jericho's cheek as she said with impossible knowledge, 'Your little boy. Callum. Six months old. Think of Callum. You'll see him again if you let me pass. Don't leave him alone, Monica.' Then she whispered an echo of the Doctor's words: 'Look after him.'

Monica covered her face with her hands so that she could not see, as she allowed Mrs Jericho to pass. Monica felt Steven's leg bump against her. When she looked up again, she saw the lift doors closing on mother and child.

The security guard shouted at Mrs Jericho and half-chased her from the building. He did not commit himself to a full pursuit because he had been on the Saturday night shift and knew that this was indeed her son. But the boy seemed lifeless and the woman would not listen to his pleas to slow down.

He threatened her with all the authority a security guard possesses, which is none, and when he grabbed her shoulder, her head twitched with such force that he feared her neck would snap. She bundled the boy into the passenger seat, then took her place behind the steering wheel. The guard banged on the car window. He could not see inside because the windows were gold-sputtered glass, reflecting his panic.

Then the man flinched, stepped back. Somehow, he knew that the woman stared out of the interior, looking at him. Strangely, the thought of his daughters and wife stabbed into his head. He had chosen night duty to get away from their constant clamour. Now, as the car drove away, he regretted this.

All he wanted to do was go home and hold his family.

The guard walked back into the building and he saw a trail of blood leading from the lifts, out of the door, to the place where the car had been. The boy had been sick but not bleeding this heavily, and the woman's cuts could not have left so great an amount of fluid. The blood-path seemed to spread in patches to the right, then patches to the left, as if the blood had been flowing down the woman's legs.

The guard was not a doctor or a scientist, so he did not study the trail too closely – nor did Roz when she ran out of the building five minutes later, rubbing her head and realizing that an industrial wasteland would have no taxi ranks. No one stopped to inspect the flecks of material in the red pools: thin, flinty flakes like the limescale from a kettle, tiny clues telling of an old and fearsome affliction.

* * *

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Mrs Jericho drove and sang little songs to her passenger. The new version, the better boy, would be able to join in with the chorus. His singing could replace the Voice, which now surged in her head and gut, losing its words in the sheer volume of its roar. She could not tell whether the Voice grieved or celebrated, but then, she no longer knew that of herself. She did know, of course, that no one would understand what she had done, and that policemen and courts would return to damn her for even –

Above the Voice she heard the mocking laughter of Sally Hunt, somewhere in the world; Sally Hunt, who had demanded a red velvet shirt, knowing that the action would force young Eva Dalloway to this poisoned hour. Eva thought of her mother's nursery rhyme, ' *Some are born to sweet delight, some are born to endless night,* ' but now Sally Hunt sang the song, then shrieked, ' *Which one are you, Eva Dalloway? Guess which one you are! Endless night, Eva, endless night for the rest of your life!* '

Mrs Jericho clutched the wheel, glancing at the A–Z propped open on the dashboard. She wondered why the windscreen was not full of rain, when water swam in her eyes. The authorities appeared now, trying to block the roads. She heard them shout of a disaster near by, but they were lying, of course, trying to steal the child away. She drove on, ignoring their demands to stop.

A desperate hope sustained her, that a golden place lay beyond the

authorities, but within her grasp. She thought of her house in the Alto Adige, the only place she had ever been happy. She had spent nine months there with Steven, alone with her son, laughing in the cold spring sunshine. His precious few days of being normal – no, better than normal, perfect.

Mrs Jericho understood that she had brought Steven's illness upon him, that she was to blame. The moment she stepped from the plane at Heathrow, she had brought her son back to the place where his twin would prosper, to spite her, at Steven's expense. Mrs Jericho flicked, flicked, flicked her hair, concentrating on the Alto Adige. She would have that heaven again. Now, the skim of neon and streetlights in the city centre became a tunnel of stars, transporting her to that realm with the new Steven. Mrs Jericho wept with joy, and if the old Steven whimpered at her side, then she thought him glad to be going home.

He would see his real mother. They would be happy. All the mothers and all the children would laugh in the sun once more.

The Doctor's helter-skelter drive through the city ended in collision. One mile from the viaduct, he careered around a corner and slammed into the back of a parked truck. Vehicles had been stationed across the street as a temporary roadblock. Shaking the dizziness from his head, the Doctor clambered from 150

the Mini, uttering silent apologies to Monica Jeffries. The army truck's driver did not come running. Everyone seemed to be at the far end of the terraced row, and beyond them, fire began to claim the Baxter estate. Sirens sounded from all directions, and then a fire engine rounded the same corner, narrowly missing another crash. The fire sergeant jumped from the cab and started swearing at the Doctor, but the, Doctor slipped between the gap separating the Mini from the fire engine, and ran ahead to get a better view.

He could see the newly crenellated lip of the viaduct rising above the flames.

Then he looked behind him. The viaduct had been deemed necessary in 1912

because of the shallow valley which bisected the city. Now, on the streets bordering the top of the incline, the Doctor saw the headlights of familiar, grey jeeps swing into position. The Doctor knew that these arrivals bore the UNIT insignia.

Only a small part of the Doctor welcomed the support. The rest of him despaired. Events woven in part by the silent lives of the Quadrant's inhabitants were escalating beyond the personal on to an epic scale, and he had yet to find the heart of the problem. Or what he *thought* to be its heart.

Then the Doctor heard the burglar alarms. They were being set off, one house after another, in a chain leading away from, and not caused by, the disaster. The Doctor looked at his feet and felt the faint vibration in the pavement.

The city's foul water system was an elegant construction, consisting of a ring of huge sewers which intercepted all the smaller sewers, taking the waste to a main trunk sewer which stretched to the treatment works at Slade Farms. Half a mile from the Baxter estate, a huge inverted syphon drew sewage from the Eastern Foul Water Interceptor, transporting it thirty metres below the river bed. The syphon was now ruined, and rough, improvised tunnels – little more than massive holes gouged out of the walls – formed a new passageway to the previously unconnected Eastern Storm Water Interceptor. This interceptor was a triumph of engineering, a horseshoe shaped tunnel five kilometres long and five metres in diameter. Workmen had excavated two hundred thousand cubic metres of rock and soil, little knowing that they were building a temporary home for the Capper.

The creature filled a section of tunnel, at rest, its stilts and arms folded into a sulk. Chris stood three metres away, and got his breath back. The chase through the tunnels had been an ordeal, as the Capper realized that although its physical form jammed within Chris's transmission field, flying lumps of masonry would not. Chris had dodged and weaved in pursuit, thankful that the Capper was growing weak. It preferred to run rather than expend energy on attack. They played their game of cat and mouse – or mouse and mouse, 151

thought Chris, both of them scared of the other until the Capper forced an entrance into the interceptor. It seemed that some vestige of the Capper's human dignity preferred a storm water rather than a foul water hideaway.

Now, both had reached a standoff. Uncertain of what to do next, Chris stretched, discarding the shreds of his ripped T-shirt. He was battered and bruised, and to make things worse, his infected ear was stinging like mad.

Nevertheless, he had time to admire his surroundings. Great care had been taken with the underground chamber. Doric pillars lined the vault, like the temple of some troglodyte sect, with the Capper as its most recent god.

He admired the machine also, in the way that he preferred twentieth-century cars to more sophisticated vehicles. It was bold and obvious, dripping with oil and releasing gas, camouflaging the smart technology within. Then it spoke. 'Hey, boy. Can you tell me?'

The Capper seemed to have simplified itself and spoke from its ordinary mouth, albeit with the throat-light shining between chinks of teeth. Chris replied in a stern Adjudicator's tone. 'Tell you what?'

He was surprised when the Capper spoke quietly, more like the nineteen-year-old boy at the creature's centre. The voice was timid. 'Do you know what's happened to me?'

Chris had only heard tales of the Capper's drug dealing, suicide and subsequent transformation, forgetting that the plain, human Simon Jenkins lay stretched on a crucifix of alien metal. Chris knew how it felt to have something encroach on the soul, and knew also that he had never suffered as much as the Capper. 'I don't know,' whispered Chris. 'Can't you tell? You must be in contact with the machine.'

'Oh, yeaaah,' said the Capper in a seductive drawl. Then, in his ruined face, eyes shone with wonder. 'It's big in here,' breathed the Capper. 'So big, man.

If I look too deep, I'll lose myself.'

'What can you see?'

'Everything.' The Capper's eyes glistened, looking to the middle distance.

Chris had wondered whether the creature was luring him closer, ready to attack, but now he realized that Simon Jenkins had no other intent; images boiled in his brain and had to be spoken. 'I can see the universe. Stars dying, curling into molten fuel. Galaxies exploding in webs of dark matter. And fleets of Bowships riding the ion reefs.' He left a pause, then was almost inaudible.

'But I can't see the Capper. I'm lost. Lost in the machine. It loves me and I'm lost. There's my voice, yeah, and my memories, and everything I want, I can do, and it's magnificent. But it's not me.' He

looked at Chris with quiet despair. ‘Is it?’

‘No,’ said Chris. There was a long silence, then Chris asked, ‘Capper, what happened? To make you like this?’

‘The coke,’ said the Capper simply, and he attempted a shrug. ‘Screws you up, man, Mamma always said.’ Then the leg joints drew themselves in closer, hiding the Capper’s face. Chris thought he said, ‘Don’t let her see me like this.’

Another silence passed, then the Capper spoke again, his voice flatter. ‘I took the coke. And there it was. My secret friend, wriggling like a worm in my head, telling me what to do. Licking my mind, telling me I was special – I had the cocaine an’ I lived near the kid, just perfect. Lucky old Capper, his chance for the Big Time. But I told it no, man, kept telling it no. No one tells the Capper what to do. Only way I could stop it was the petrol.’ The Capper giggled weakly. ‘Now it’s the other way round. Now I’m the worm inside its head, calling the shots. But not for long.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The boys, man, the boys are coming together. It can taste the waveform on the air. It just let me have my killing spree ’cos it knew that soon, the whole world can see the N-form. Then it all starts. Then the Capper gets shoved to one side and this thing goes for it. Should see the plans. *Mean*. The War must be fought, the War must be won.’

In a sudden action, the Capper unfolded. Chris leapt back, but saw that the Capper was only extending its arms in a pleading gesture. The patchwork face implored, ‘D’you wanna know the *really* funny thing? Lemme tell you the really, really funny thing.’ The Capper sighed a long, low hiss of engine breath. ‘The thing is, turns out my old friend’s been doing this all over the Earth. Popping into heads, leaving instructions, manoeuvring its way off Norman’s Cay, through Barcelona. It’s seen the world, seen more than me. Every time, man, every time it uses someone, does the worm thing, then rips up the evidence. Leaves the head like squashed fruit so the feller can’t say what’s happened. And this is what gets me, ain’t this the bitch? Turns out I’m the only one who ever put up a fight. An’ do you know what that means? It told me. It means I’m clever, boy, it means I’m clever an’ strong an’ sussed, best mind it ever came across, an’ I never knew it. Takes one hell of a brain to resist this thing, an’ I did. Burnt myself

rather than listen. I should have been leading the world, it says. But I never left the estate. Never got out. Turns out, all these years, I could have made something of myself.' The Capper's voice dwindled. 'Now something's been made out of me.'

'Pity the poor Capper,' said a cold voice. Chris turned. The Doctor stood at the tunnel entrance, cloaked in shadow. Thin streams of black water poured from the arch to curtain his arrival. He whispered and yet his words filled the chamber.

'He got his nickname because he shot a sixteen-year-old boy through the kneecaps. A boy who had dared to keep some of the Capper's precious money.

If the Capper was lost in life, then he sought to profit from his fellow losers.

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Cocaine was just the glamorous end of the trade. The Capper's real job was the manufacture of junkies – barbiturates, amphetamines, benzodiapines, all sold at the school gate. The heroin crystallizing to a sticky black toffee on the teeth of his victims, victims who came back for more, every time. You had this coming, Capper. Your own business practices have consumed you.'

The Doctor stepped forward and Chris was surprised to see a perverse satisfaction on his face. The Capper hissed, shuffled back and raised pincer arms, ready to strike, but then the Doctor spoke in a language Chris did not understand. He muttered thick, gluey vowels spiked with sharp consonants, the words rising, and falling with sinister cadence. The creature shuddered, straightened its nine-metre legs, slamming the Capper's body against the roof.

It seemed terrified. Then it froze, and the Capper's face went blank. The Doctor fell silent, letting the chant roll away into the sewers, then gave Chris an empty smile.

'The Patrexian Numbers,' he said, and his eyes looked to an impossible distance. 'In the Capitol on Gallifrey, the Lodge of the Academy of the Patrexes is surmounted by a gate of solid light. At the pinnacle of the gate there revolves a ball of gold, said to be the first gold ever formed. It's held there by harmonics alone, spinning in the dusty air for all perpetuity. Beautiful and pointless, like everything wrought by the Patrexes.' The Doctor's tone hardened, while fire engines and police cars roared above. 'Patrexians are artists, aesthetes, shallow

epicureans with pale skin and pretentious minds. They revel in the beauty of the death of suns. On the battlefield, they see only gorgeous colours of fire and blood. To the Patrexes, the universe is a canvas, and they give it polite applause. I thought they only stood back to admire the grand design, too idle and effete to shape the pattern themselves. But it seems their brushes have been busy, decking the sky with their own images. They built this. The N-form. A wonderful sculpture, no matter that it kills without compunction.

Perhaps that's part of the design, the triumph of art over life.'

The Doctor stepped closer and Chris went to join him, to include him in the transmission field, but the Doctor waved him away. 'I don't think it'll touch me. I've spoken the first bridge of the Patrexian Numbers, the middle core should be suspended. The same numerical base exists at the heart of every piece of artwork, just as it does at the Lodge gate. Call it painting-by-numbers. The Patrexes are artificers with very little imagination. It's their curse and our blessing that they'll never achieve the status of high art, they haven't the imagination. Saints preserve us from the amateur artist.'

'Then you've turned it off?' asked Chris, but the Capper hissed steam between its teeth in denial. Its face was no longer blank: grey bone-fingers protruded to lace the forehead in an approximation of a frown.

'I've just kept a few subroutines busy,' said the Doctor. 'Turning it off will 154

mean delving deeper, but I can do it. It's over, Chris. It should have been over millions of years ago. The war for which the N-form was created ended in the Time of Legend. But it's up to me to clean up the mess, as usual.' Stepping even closer, he growled more numbers. Two of the Capper's limbs sagged, but the main body remained intact, bristling. The Doctor continued, 'This thing would be dangerous at the best of times, but it's damaged. It's lurching from its own function to the Capper's. The Capper should be just a tool, a blueprint of his race's genetic pattern for the N-form to assimilate, to know its enemy.

But his mind's riding high in there, dominating the interface. It has to stop.'

Grim, the Doctor called Chris over and began to tinker with the sash, repairing crisped wires. He removed the LED counter, keeping it attached to the sash by a lead stolen from an electric kettle. Chris wondered whether to keep the silence, but could not.

‘So,’ he said awkwardly, ‘Gallifrey, then. Again.’ The Doctor did not reply, though his expression clouded. Better than a punch in the face, thought Chris, remembering David’s words, and he pressed on. ‘So this thing’s one of yours?

The Time Lords?’

‘In terms of species, yes,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘In terms of Acadamies, no.

I’m a Prydonian. It’s been a long time since I felt proud of my Chapter, but at least they declared this thing should never be built. Prydonians might be devious, but at least we’re honest about it.’

Given the stories Benny had told, it occurred to Chris that whenever the Time Lords had a spring-clean, they threw their rubbish out into the universe for others to deal with. Maybe they invented the fridge magnet, which then insinuated itself into countless civilizations. He left the thought unsaid, but the Doctor glowered at him as though reading his mind. ‘There’s nothing amusing about this creature,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s ready to activate across the country and slaughter the planet. The cocaine must have spread far and wide by now, it’s been in circulation since the beginning of July.’

‘And there’s a piece of N-form in every gram of coke?’

‘Tagged to separate molecules, which act as its anchor in the three-dimensional world. The real N-form exists in a pocket dimension, specially created as its lair.’ In the Doctor’s hands, the LED began to flash alien numbers, like Chinese script. ‘Once it’s hooked to the drug, it’s ingested into the human body. Psychoactive drugs can forge a physical addiction in the user.

This century is just discovering that chemicals can actually scar brain tissue –

a tiny lesion called an engram. And the scar then cries out for its creator, more of the same drug, demanding to be fed. A little red mouth in the middle of your head, calling for succour. Hence addiction. But in this case, the N-form hook carves out an engram, in more than three dimensions. The damaged tissue becomes a dimensional vent, through which the N-form can enter the 155

physical world, shoving itself into the brain and taking over, remaining teth-ered to its hull in the dimensional tuck. Everyone who’s taken this batch of cocaine hydrochloride has got an engram

waiting to release half a ton of metal into the skull. It needs to scatter these entrances across a distance, so that the fabric of reality isn't breached. Better to use lots of small doors rather than one gaping hole. It's through such a breach that the Vampires swarmed in the first place.'

'The what?'

'The Vampires. The enemy this N-form was created to destroy.'

'Vampires as in, vampires?'

'Yes. Vampires.'

Chris laughed. He stopped laughing as the Doctor looked up and Chris saw his eyes. They were black and desolate. Deep within, the light of ages executed its slow, unending arc; beneath that, something raw and bleeding raged. Transfixed, Chris did not know whether the Doctor said, or thought, the warning: 'Gabriel Tyler has a twin and he feeds off him. Even now, he's draining life from his brother. The wasting corresponds to a vampiric waveform, the v-stet. And the N-form's broken, its artificial intelligence was taken when the war ended, so it's reaching out for anything close to its Imperative.

If the N-form decides the human race has a Vampire inheritance, then its instructions are clear. To destroy the world. The War must be fought, the War must be won.' The Doctor finished adapting the LED display and pointed it at the Capper. On either side of the dimensional wall, the N-form shook.

'But you can stop it?' asked Chris, his voice low.

'Oh yes. The Patrexian Numbers have given it pause for thought, but it can shunt them around and lose them as waste routines. I'll have to interface through an engram of my own and transmit closedown to the core. Now give me the cocaine.'

'Ah,' said Chris.

'Oh,' said the Doctor.

Chapter 11

The Doctor spoke of wars and legends and histories older than the

galaxy while smaller, more intricate, equally deadly patterns took their final shape as human and Gallifreyan lots intertwined. The people now gathered in the design would not amount to the smallest scintilla against the vast panorama which had set events in motion, and yet each person played a vital role in re-creating that vista. Slowly but surely, these things happened: Forty miles outside the suburbs, nothing moved in the Thompson house.

Alfred Jericho and his cousin Thomas dripped and gathered dust.

In the Frei Institute, Nurse Monica Jeffries thought that she should get her husband to bring her home, but the thought of Nick driving through this strange night chilled her. She waited instead, watching the city.

Still tied to a chair, Dr Greco wondered about his paymasters' anger. The Brotherhood didn't take kindly to failure, and their oaths told dark stories of *le Docteur*.

Roslyn Forrester shouted at her taxi driver to go faster, but he had to take a detour. The city's central arteries were being blocked off. When she argued that it would be quicker to run, he told her that pedestrians were being turned back, 'But not to worry, love, I know this city like the back of me hand, I'll get you there. Call it jungle instinct, like your lot, no offence, plenty of my friends are darkies. Cheer up, love, it's not the end of the world.' Roz used the late Thomas Lambert's phone to get hold of Chris, but his receiver was out of range, deep underground.

The taxi sped past the Gas Oil Club, a late-night dive in which the Institute's receptionist sat alone and furious, getting blind drunk.

Three miles away, the army joined the police to begin evacuation of the Baxter estate; the fire spread towards the river, away from the Quadrant, so the housing block was unfortunately low on the list of priorities. No one could reach the few remaining survivors of the Inter-City 125. Screams could still be heard from the wreckage, but less and less.

Around this, UNIT troops enacted their well-rehearsed routines, although the soldiers wasted time arguing with the regular army, jostling for position.

Beyond the city, armoured vehicles received permission from Geneva to begin their descent upon the city.

The majority of the Quadrant's inhabitants stayed behind their doors, even 157

as newsflashes about the train crash interrupted *The Hands of the Ripper*. Normally, the tricoteuses would have gathered on the walkways, perhaps to journey across the Baxter estate for a good gander, but the news of many deaths somehow struck a chord, a foreboding, and they stayed in their chairs and shivered, although the night was warm. Mrs Hearn made herself another cup of tea. Mr Skinner punched his wife in the ribs because they had run out of milk. In the Thomases', the Evanses' and many other flats, the children would not sleep, troubled by bad dreams. Children not much older than these came and went from the Leathers' kitchen window. Jack and Irene toasted themselves with cheap sparkling wine. Jack called their newest fourteenyear-old recruit inside for an extra special celebration, while Irene watched.

Only one figure loitered on the landing: David Daniels. He lit another cigarette – he had given up smoking last year but started again when Cher-nobyl went off; if the air was poisoned, why bother being healthy? David watched as a woman walked across the Quadrant, heading for the north stairwell. His glasses were in the flat so he could not see her properly, but he thought that she looked rough, perhaps drunk. He looked away. He was waiting for the Doctor, as instructed. He heard the sirens from the Baxter estate and he knew that Chris would be involved. He feared for him, while instinct told him to go home and keep his head down. Nevertheless he lingered, out of spite, because Mrs Skinner had snapped at him while putting her milk bottles out, telling him she didn't want homos hanging round her front door. David looked at his flat and wondered whether Harry seriously intended chucking him out. The light was on in the bedroom. Better to wait till Harry's asleep.

In his bedroom, Harry hugged his knees and rocked, offering prayers to fend off the Devil in the wardrobe. The litany contained David's name. Sylvie's ghost was a wild thing, spiralling around the room and urging Harry to get up, to get out, to run for his life – a darkness stronger than the powers of the hereafter was circling their lives and she had not the strength to save him. But Harry could not move.

Gabriel wished Mr Harvey would stop crying, but mostly he thought *I'm not here*, dreading that the Witch was too wise for his spells. She was coming, Gabriel knew, closer and closer, and her hair was streaming in the wind, her teeth wet for his flesh. Now, she carried something at her side, a totem which Gabriel recognized from the

films: a voodoo doll moulded in his image.

Through the eyes of the facsimile, Gabriel no longer saw noughts and crosses.

He saw a tunnel of stars, bringing the Witch to the Quadrant.

By the east stairwell, tucked out of sight, Bev Tyler brushed rubbish from her clothes. She was aching from sunburn and cider, but she could not go home. She couldn't face her mother, the lying bitch, the woman who preached the law, wiped lipstick off Bev's face and called her a slut, while all the time 158

she'd been selling her own kids. Bev wondered if home still existed. It could now be swarming with social workers, ready to send Gabriel and herself off to different homes, and Mum to prison. Carl was old enough to stay put. He would live in number 41, all alone. He'd probably change his surname, so that no one would point him out as a Tyler. Bev wished that Maxine wasn't in Rhyl, but she knew that even if she had a friend nearby, she couldn't tell them the truth about the Tyler family. They would screech with laughter at Bev's shame. Bev was locked in silence and did not move.

Carl Tyler plugged his headphones into the tape deck and nodded to

'Wanted Dead or Alive', wondering if he had time for a kip before Mum called him for supper. He was fed up of his room, having been incarcerated in there for most of the past fortnight because he was in the doghouse. But still he did not move.

In the living room, there came a knocking from outside. Winnie Tyler automatically kept the kitchen knife in her hand as she walked numbly to the front door. It was her fourth visitor of the day; it could only bring more bad news. She opened the door.

'The goods are in the car, Mrs Tyler. Could you get someone to fetch them?

Then we can all be happy.'

Chris was disturbed by the Doctor's sudden sweat. As he unbuckled the sash and strapped it around the Doctor, he gabbled, 'I mean, just one look and the N-form's going to know it's wrong – I don't care what state Gabriel's in, or this other kid, they haven't got fangs.'

The Doctor clipped the LED display to his lapel, saying, 'They don't need cloaks and dripping blood, Chris. The Vampire was a life form

from a dark universe, perhaps a distillation of our nightmares from N-Space itself – the fear of our own blood. And its power was psi-generated, its ability to mes-merize and control its victims. Now shut up and run. Get that cocaine.' He shoved Chris away. Chris leapt through the interceptor's funnel and the Doctor could bear him striding, sloshing through the sewage. Then he turned back to the Capper. Simon Jenkins's face was squashed up against the concrete, but he managed a sadistic leer.

'Too late, Time Lord,' he said, and mighty engines stirred beneath his voice.

'It's happening.'

'You're not my concern,' snapped the Doctor. 'You're dead and finished, Capper. My business is with the N-form.

Flames of anger unfurled within the throat-light, but the Capper stayed silent as the Doctor sat in a lotus position on the sewer floor. He fiddled with the LED counter and it maintained its transmission of the Patrexian Numbers into the creature's receptors, allowing the Doctor access. Denied a proper 159

interface, he could still communicate through the telepathic field, but without an engram in his head, he came as messenger, not master. The Doctor closed his eyes, breathed in, breathed out, then seemed to breathe no more as his mind plunged into the void.

The Doctor flinched, touching on something massive with fury, and savage: the Capper. He bounced sideways, slid deeper, finding something small and gibbering and begging for release: the Capper again, and even the Doctor pitied him, but hurtled onward. For a moment, he teetered on the brink of a cyberspacial chasm, thought, 'No, thanks,' and moved on to harbour in an archive duct. Mercifully, the archive was an unemotional repository of information, composed in mannered Patrexian, and the Doctor absorbed it: *The Time of Legend, the Great Tapestry depicting the Eternal Wars. Bowships banausic in shape did sail into battle, manned by the Academies of Prydon and Arcalia. The Patrexes did remain aloof and unfevered. They did foment cleverer, prettier stratagies. At the height of the War, the Patrexes did whisper in the Lord Rassilon's ear They spoke of their design, the N-form, a daring, bold fusion of arcane technology with precision dynamics. N-forms would scatter across the universe in shimmering pocket dimensions, there to wait. They would be poised to recognize the undesirable Vampiric waveform Once sure of its staging, an N-form would surge into the physical*

world to remove from the Tapestry any species found guilty of carrying the waveform. The machines were magnificent, fearsome engines of war capable of transmuting their hull into any shape, a kaleidoscope of weapons, worthy of awards.

Rassilon befuddled by War and long since blind to aesthetic balance, did consult both Prydonians and Arcalians, and they forbade the creation of such a device.

So the Patrexes did set to work They were wise beyond words, commissioning the separate elements from far-flung worlds, each artisan constructing a part of the N-form without knowing its whole. True art can only he appreciated in the eye of the omniscient artist. The final unveiling did take place in an artificial dimension gallery beneath the Capitol itself, and the Patrexes did gaze in awe. Each N-form was suffused with different pigments, then unleashed. The universe did become a wondrous minefield alive with spontaneity.

The Patrexian exhibition was a triumph. Vampire worlds died in seconds. The N-form retreated into the tuck before the clumsy Academies of Prydon and Arcalia could come prying, and the Patrexes did applaud themselves fervently. The greatest art is performed in secret, because it makes the audience a conspirator; the experience is unique.

Bowships and N-forms combined did win the War, and the Vampires were un-woven from the Tapestry, all save one, which did vanish, even to his own shadow.

With regret, the Chancellor of the Patrexes did order the

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The archive recorded nothing more until its reawakening. The Capper gave a dirty chuckle. ‘It’s history, man, dead and forgotten. This is now. Can’t you feel it? Feel the boys, those pretty boys, oh-so-close, man. The Big Time.’ His head jerked with laughter. Half a dozen teeth splashed into the storm-water drain. The Doctor ignored him, but a trickle of sweat ran down his forehead.

Deep in the machine he felt the Imperative shift, heaving itself into the correct position for activation, and, desperately, the Doctor thought back.

He asserted his own knowledge, appealing to the N-form to trust him

and obey his instructions. ‘You, shortarse?’ mocked the Capper. ‘Go play soldiers outside.’ The Doctor recorded his own fight against the last of the Vampires in E-Space, with the Lady Romana, and his later pursuit of the Vampire inheritance to Earth and Gallifrey. Then, his clothes soaked in perspiration and sewage, he slammed the point home:

Your intelligence was downloaded back to Gallifrey, you were junked, left to decay in your dimensional trap. Your faithful Patrexes moved on, they probably discovered the joys of the Magic Marker. This reactivation is a mistake, you’ve been triggered by accident. The War is over, the War was won, millions of years ago, and you’re part of the debris; a damaged, deranged machine robbed of its mind, clinging to a human corpse in desperation.

‘No –’ roared the N-form in many different voices, while its quieter circuits shrank inwards, analysing the words. The Doctor thought on: *You were forgotten, N-form. You drifted through dimensional interstices, tumbling past coordinates corresponding to Colombia when you thought the signal came. The call to arms. There was no signal. No Time Lord ordered your activation from afar, I swear it. Gallifrey has turned from war, it practises a subtler violence now, and only the Patrexes know that you ever existed.*

I’ve followed you for many years. If I’d known your origin, I’d have moved faster I was there with Ace, beside the Rio Yari in the province of Caqueta, 1983, the woodland scattered as though a meteorite had landed. It was you, awakened from the Sleeping, bursting from the breach. But you left no sign, slipped the greater part of yourself back into the tuck while you anchored yourself in the coca plant at a molecular level.

Then fifteen months later, hundreds of years earlier in my timeline: Tranqui-landia, a cocaine kitchen five kilometres wide, complete with its own airstrips and village, secured against the military and guerrillas on its own island. Jo and I were taken there after the assault by Jaime Ramirez Gomez to see the real reason for the raid. Half the workers had fled in terror, while the rest had died, their heads pulped from within, but only after your instructions had invaded their thoughts. We were too late to stop the last consignments flying to Mexico, there to begin the journey to Norman’s Cay. I’ve followed you, Patrexian. And you’re wrong. The waveform you sniffed out from South America is an aberration, it’s 161

a very small and very ordinary tragedy. It is not the War.

The N-form drew back in the tunnel, arms wheeling and glittering in

the throat-light. The Capper's face was malevolent, and doubting. 'You're lying,'

it spat. The Doctor stood up as he felt dampeners surround the telepathic field, booting him out.

'Your own systems will tell you I'm right, if you'll just listen to them,' shouted the Doctor, storming after the Capper. 'Why hasn't the Imperative activated?

Why the delay? Why didn't you just unleash the War stratagem in Colombia, why trawl halfway across the world?' The Doctor's voice bellowed through the interceptor, dominating the army trucks and helicopters buzzing overhead, the harbingers of war. 'I'll tell you why. Because your own security systems are telling you you're wrong. There are no Vampires. You'd know that if the Capper wasn't driving you mad. Listen to yourself, not to me. You know you're wrong.'

The insectoid legs clattered against the brickwork in frustration, but, for a second, the Capper's face appeared to be deep in thought. Then his features broke into a chilling smile. 'Nope,' he chuckled, and he simulated the noise made on *Family Fortunes* for a wrong answer. 'Try again.'

'The human race does not contain the Vampire inheritance –'

'Yeah? You wanna taste Simon Jenkins, man. Jesus, I taste rich. Yum. And it's there, a descendant gene. In the blood. Blood betrays you, always does.'

The Doctor stamped the water in anger. 'There's a possible Haemovoric evolution in the future, but that's no danger, it'll just feed on itself and lead to extinction – I know, I've seen it. But any race has the capacity to evolve in any direction at any time, that's the miracle of the universe. You can't sit as judge, jury and executioner over potential futures. Even the Patrexes' safety margins must allow for that.'

The Capper's smile became twee. He drummed a multitude of fingers against his flesh and metal chin. In the condescending tone with which Simon Jenkins addressed the mountainbike kids who carried his cash across town, the Capper said, 'You just answer two things, two teensy-weensy little things, an' I promise I'll turn myself off and slip away, night, Mum, night, Dad, up the stairs to Bedfordshire.'

'Ask them.'

The Capper's voice grew colder and the head swung low on the multi-jointed neck, the light from its mouth causing the Doctor to shrink back. It enjoyed his discomfort, breathed out noxious gas, the head swaying to and fro like a cobra. 'Number one.' it said quietly. 'If the War is over and the War is won, how come the signal to reactivate comes from the future?'

The Capper grinned as the Doctor's face fell; new shadows joined old shadows in his lined features. 'It can't,' he breathed softly. 'Your information must 162

be wrong.'

'Nope,' said the Capper. 'Checked. Double-checked, triple-checked. Correct codes, the full monty. The call to arms came from a time yet to come. Seems the War's started all over again. Did they forget to tell you?'

'It can't have,' said the Doctor, despairing.

'Goes to show, you don't know everything. I mean, li'l feller, you didn't know the Earth comes to an end in 1987. Maybe it didn't, once upon a time, but it does now.' Enraged, the Doctor began to shout more Patrexian Numbers.

The Capper mocked his panic, chattering his remaining teeth and pretending to blow the Doctor a kiss, then crooning, 'Number two. And it's an appropriate place for number twos, this.' He snickered, then snapped, 'How many Vampiric waveforms exist up there?'

'One,' said the Doctor firmly. 'The warped signature between Gabriel Tyler and Steven Jericho.'

Now the Capper reared up to its full height, its limbs rattling with pleasure and chipping the tunnel wall into flakes. Again, the *Family Fortunes* buzzer roared from its systems and it stared down at the little man below. 'Wrong,' it hissed exultantly. 'There are two.'

'This is a malfunction,' yelled the Doctor. 'Two boys, yes, but one waveform.

I've been out there, I've seen them, it's Gabriel Tyler –'

'You've seen nothing. You've been running around with clever little plots and funny little devices and you haven't reached the centre of the maze.

You've missed it. Clever little Time Lord, and for once in your life, you've missed it. Two boys, Doctor. And the woman.'

There was a silence. The Doctor exhaled, long and slow. He was weary; he was lost. Despite the dampeners, he could pick up echoes from the telepathic field and he knew that the N-form was not lying. He asked in a flat voice,

'What woman?'

The Capper ignored the question, enjoying the Doctor's desolation. 'Ibis waveform's no accident, no single mutation. They're breeding. The filthy things are spawning up there.' The Capper reached out its arms along the interceptor's arch, loading his voice with mock sorrow. 'They have to die.

Mercy me, they have to die. That's the Imperative.' Then the imitation of sadness allowed something real to flood the Capper's face and his eyes shone with tears. 'I can't stop it, Doctor.' It came as a whisper, as though the Capper feared that the N-form would hear. 'It's happening now and there's nothing I can do. The Imperative's opening and the War is upon us. God help us. God damn your people to Hell, Doctor.' The N-form began to rise.

Chris ran towards a road block, threw himself over the sandbags and kept running, even as soldiers shouted at him to stop. He raced back to the viaduct, to 163

the dead bodies littering the arch. The train-fire was raging out of control and Chris could feel his breath being burnt from his lungs as he found one drug dealer's corpse. He rooted in the pockets, found nothing, ran to a second body.

It was the man called Charlie, halved in a diagonal line from his shoulder to his opposite hip, and still smouldering from the explosion. Chris rummaged in both pieces of Charlie for the cocaine, and found some.

Then he heard the click of a rifle barrel behind him. He looked up to see two soldiers placing him under arrest. All three cowered from the wall of heat as the soldiers accused him of being a looter. Chris held on to the envelope of coke, and, in desperation, he shouted the Doctor's name. Other soldiers, in different uniforms, seemed to respond and ran towards him.

David Daniels was fed up of waiting. He thought it worth the risk to

pop back home for a can of Coke from the fridge. The moment he crept through the front door and heard the whimpering, he entered Harry's room – for the first time in his life, without knocking.

'Oh my good God,' whispered David. Harry was red, a man made of red.

He was drenched in blood from the chest down, and it smeared his animal face. Harry pressed himself into the corner. He gulped David's name, his voice distant, failing. Even as he ran to Harry, David thought of young Gabriel Tyler for some reason. He even looked around, as though the boy might be standing beside him, but saw no one.

I'm not here, I'm not here, I'm not here.

David hesitated, panicking, revolted by the open wound fringed with black thread. Then said to Harry, 'Hold on, love. I'm here.' He ran back to the front room and plugged the phone back in, after Harry's fit this morning. He dialled 999. The operator told him that it could take an hour, maybe longer, for an ambulance to reach the Quadrant – there was an emergency in the city. David shouted at her, then barely heard the advice as she told him how to staunch the bleeding, but he muttered, 'Yeah, yeah, right, gotcha.' As soon as he put down the phone, everything she had said deserted him. He returned to Harry and stood over him, useless. Harry gabbled about graveyards and monsters and men, and he seemed to think of Gabriel Tyler also, pointing at the empty wardrobe and cursing the boy.

Harry reached out both arms, imploring David to hold him, to take the pain away. David grimaced and would only crouch beside Harry. He patted his wrist, not wanting to get blood on Mitch's lucky shirt. Kinder men would have embraced Harry, but David thought mainly of himself, wishing he had never come home for that bloody Coke in the first place.

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Unseen, Gabriel stepped out of the wardrobe and stood just six feet away from David and Mr Harvey.

For all Gabriel's fear and his certain knowledge that, even now, the Witch strode the Quadrant walkways, things were beginning to clarify. The Witch had separated from the voodoo doll. Free from her malign

influence, the doll seemed to be forming a mouth, puckering its waxen skin, speaking Gabriel's name in a copy of his face. In that moment, Gabriel began to understand; not the truth of events, but the sense of them.

For many years he had kept the eye-trick his secret, using it only to avoid trouble and to get comics, sweets and drawing paper, and he knew that when people were shining – burning on the cusp of some strong emotion – he could read their lives in one glance. But in his mother's eyes, there had always been something cold, secret, something which skittered away in fear whenever he stared too deep. He was glad to look away. The little skittering thing looked too much like himself. Sometimes he imagined that his mother secretly hated him. Now he saw that which had been hidden. Mum had moulded the talking doll with her own hands. Her fingerprints, not those of the Witch, were imprinted on the duplicate.

Come to me, said the doll, mimicking his spells. Gabriel felt exhilarated, a feeling surely akin to the sex-things over which Carl sniggered and Bev blushed behind Mum's back. Gabriel looked beyond the bedroom, at the open front door.

'That must hurt,' said Winnie Tyler softly. 'Why don't you stop? Just stop, it'll feel better then. I promise.'

The woman Winnie now understood to be Mrs Jericho sat in the armchair and would not stop twitching. Her head snapped from side to side, and sometimes she even gave a small cry of pain. Winnie knelt down and gently placed a palm at each side of her head. Mrs Jericho twitched again but Winnie pressed firmly, and then Mrs Jericho was still. 'There now,' whispered Winnie. 'Isn't that better?'

Mrs Jericho gave a ghost of a smile. 'Yes,' she said quietly. 'I think it is.'

Winnie had put down the kitchen knife as soon as she had opened the door and the woman stumbled into the flat. She led her to a chair. The woman sat, stared at the floor, then talked, the words pouring out and confusing Winnie.

The woman spoke of poor Steven and poor Alfred, but when she mentioned poor Thomas, Winnie began to understand. She asked her name and the woman wept, 'Mrs Jericho,' as though the name were something shameful.

'Jericho,' said Winnie, hearing the name for the first time. 'Jericho.'

Then Winnie had let her talk. It was just like when the kids had trouble at school 165

and they came home gabbling and weeping. Only when they calmed could Winnie find out what was wrong.

Now, the two women were suspended at the eye of the storm and all other sounds seem to fall away. Mrs Jericho's head gave one last tremor, but Winnie smiled into her face and the spasm passed. Mrs Jericho said feebly, 'I'm sorry.'

She gave a wild, short laugh, then added, 'It's my hair.'

'It's lovely hair,' smiled Winnie, stroking it. Mrs Jericho pushed the side of her face into the caress and Winnie realized how lonely this woman must be.

'Wish I had hair like that,' said Winnie.

Then Mrs Jericho sat forward to whisper, her eyes darting from side to side as though scared of the secret: 'Can you hear it?'

'Hear what?'

'The Voice. Can't you hear the Voice? I thought the whole world could, hear it. Listen. There. And it won't stop. It hates me. Or it loves me too much. Can you make it stop, Mrs Tyler?'

'Winnie.'

Mrs Jericho smiled again. 'My name's Eva. Eva Jericho, Eva Dalloway, I don't know. Both the names are soiled, and I can't take them back.'

Winnie Tyler had blocked out thoughts of Peter's mother over the years.

Thomas was easier to hate, though not as easy as hating herself. When the image of another woman cradling Peter in her arms stole into Winnie's mind, she would literally punch her head, banish the thought, unable to bear it, knowing it would lead her to the knives once more. Now she knew that Christmas Eve had brought them all to suffer. 'Eva,' she said, 'why don't we see if I can get you some help? You're bleeding.'

Mrs Jericho stared at the dark stain spreading across the chair. She smiled, as if it belonged to someone else. 'No,' she said simply, 'I'm

fine. It's you, you're bleeding, Winnie.' She touched the patch of blood on Winnie's sleeve.

'Both of us,' said Winnie.

Mrs Jericho looked up, remembering something. 'Steven,' she said brightly.

Winnie felt a clutch of pain in her stomach. 'Is that his name?' she said, bravely keeping her smile. 'I called him Peter. I thought you might keep it – I asked Thomas. Stupid, really. But Steven's a fine name.'

'Thomas. . . ?' said Mrs Jericho abstractedly. She stared into space, chasing memories, then said, 'Thomas is dead.'

There was a long silence. The sounds of sirens crept in from outside – had been there for a long time, Winnie now realized – and she connected them with Thomas's death. But it was irrelevant, God rest or damn his soul. The woman who had nursed Peter through nine and a half years of illness now sat in her living room. It was the only thing that mattered. 'Thank you,' said Winnie softly. 'Thank you for looking after Peter.'

'And Alfred. But not Sally Hunt, never Sally Hunt. She never dies.' Mrs Jericho was still staring into space. She spoke more to herself. 'I'm glad Monica stepped out of the way. I didn't want to hurt her. Monica's pregnant again, doesn't know it herself yet. They make it look so easy, her kind.'

Winnie felt herself beginning to cry. 'Look at us. All these years, Eva, the things I've done to myself. And you've had all that sickness to carry. Turns out I'm the lucky one.'

Mrs Jericho looked at her and she smiled, genuinely. It seemed to lift the years from her face, outshining her wounds. 'Oh yes, Winnie. Yes you are.

You're the lucky one.' She reached forward and touched Winnie's face, running her palm down the cheek to cup the chin, as though Winnie were beautiful. Then the hand fell to Mrs Jericho's side and she clenched it into a fist, bursting the blisters.

In the silence, Winnie lamented that she and Eva Jericho had been

kept apart for all these years. They had both carried their pain, and survived it.

They could even have been friends, though she doubted the truth of this as she looked around her living room, scattered with comics and the *Daily Mirror*, the ashtray overflowing, old coffee mugs going stale on the settee's arm. Winnie saw the room through Mrs Jericho's eyes, and she knew that no matter what others would say, she had done the right thing. Peter, or Steven, had escaped this place. He had been attended by doctors far beyond the reach of Winnie's purse. Left in the Quadrant, he would have died long ago. Winnie saw that her terrible actions had been for the best. She need not have punished herself.

The boy was better off with Eva Jericho.

Mrs Jericho looked at her as if knowing her thoughts. She said simply, 'Yes.'

Winnie gave a weak smile and tugged at her too-short skirt, embarrassed by her clothes. Mrs Jericho's were so much better, despite the blood. 'Just think,'

said Winnie sadly. 'If we'd talked like this. If we'd just sat down together. All our lives could have been so much cleaner.'

Winnie stared at the floor. From the corner of her eye, she was aware that Mrs Jericho was looking at her. Winnie turned to face her, smiling, and Mrs Jericho seemed more composed, as though her fever had passed. 'Now,' said Mrs Jericho in a formal voice. 'There are all sorts of things to tell you. So many lists, I've lived my life by lists, you'll get used to it. And if it's a matter of money, then I can help, I still want the boy to have the best. He deserves it. We should all be happy, don't you think? And you can call him Gabriel, I don't mind. I really should write this down. Nine years, where to begin?' She laughed briskly, then stood, flicking blood off her skirt as if it were dust. In a gentler voice, she said, 'You will look after him, won't you?'

A cold claw was closing in Winnie's mind, but she could not believe her own thoughts. 'Look after who?'

'The boy. Your new Gabriel,' said Mrs Jericho, with a smile of impatience.

'Now, where's Steven?'

‘You’ve got Steven,’ said Winnie slowly, still not daring to understand.

‘Yes, I know, Mrs Tyler, and I’m sorry about the mistake, but that’s why I’m here. We have to exchange the goods. We’ve been sitting with the wrong sons for nine years. Now you and I can put this right, all on our own, none of those men getting in the way. We can be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.’ Mrs Jericho smiled but tears fell down her cheeks.

‘Mrs Jericho –’

‘I said, where is he?’ Mrs Jericho’s voice was colder now and an icy light stabbed within her eyes. A fresh wave of blackish blood trickled down her leg.

Winnie began to cry, exhausted. Her head was spinning, and, Jesus, she wanted a drink. ‘You can’t do this. Gabriel’s my son.’

‘His name isn’t Gabriel now, it’s Steven. You’ll have to get used to it.’

‘You can’t take my child.’

‘Of course I can. I’ve done it before. And the purchase was faulty. I’m sorry to bring the law into this, Mrs Tyler, but I think you’ll find it’s on my side.’

Then something broke within Mrs Jericho and she leant over Winnie’s chair, spitting the words, shaking with fury. ‘It’s your fault and I’m going to make it right. You damaged the goods, not me. I’m the good mother, I’ll prove it.

Tell me, Mrs Tyler, what do you think a mother is? Is it this? This flat? Is it bringing up your kids in filth so they grow up to find more of the same?

Their own new filth, to breed children of their own, just the same? You don’t have children to make little copies of yourself, Winnie, you do it to make them better. Better than yourself. That’s the point, that’s the way the world turns, or we’d still be living in caves. And I can give that boy the chance. He can outgrow me, he can look back on his mother as stupid and small because he’s forged ahead to a better life. That’s the way things are meant to be.’ Mrs Jericho clutched her stomach as if in pain and she stepped back, allowing Winnie to stand. Mrs Jericho cried aloud, ‘I’ll prove It to you, just give me the chance. No one’s ever given me the *chance*.’ She howled in pain, ‘Dear God, won’t someone stop this Voice?’

Winnie wept. For all Mrs Jericho's madness, something honest and true glittered at the heart of her words. Winnie saw policemen and judges and social workers riding the back of Mrs Jericho's logic, because Mrs Jericho had money and influence. She could cause these things to happen. Winnie knew that she had lost. She could only cry, 'You can't. Please, Mrs Jericho.'

'Where is he?'

Winnie could not speak, gasping for air. Mrs Jericho stared at her, her eyes searching out the answer. 'You don't know. . . ?, whispered Mrs Jericho. 'Your 168

own boy, and you don't know where he is. There's your proof, Mrs Tyler.

You're unfit. He needs me.'

Winnie pushed her hands into her own face. She wanted to cry out, to shout for help, to get someone to take this woman from her, but only Carl was near by. He was still innocent, not knowing his mother's crime. If Winnie called him, then he would know the truth and despise her, so Winnie said nothing.

Mrs Jericho was no longer looking at Winnie Tyler. Her head arched upwards, luxurious black hair falling down her back, and she breathed in deep, as though catching a scent in the air. Very calmly, she walked to the front door and opened it. She looked across the Quadrant. Her voice was blissful.

'Steven,' said Mrs Jericho.

Come to me, said the doll. It needed him, convulsing in its warm, dark-leather cradle. Gabriel stood, and he thought:

I'm here.

'Gabriel?' said David Daniels. To him, the kid had just blinked into existence at the foot of the bed. David stared and the boy's Glamour reflected back every man David had ever loved: Gabriel was beautiful. Harry started screaming, seeing the Devil, his own devils, and he grabbed David, smearing Mitch's lucky shirt with blood. David shook the old man off, shouting at him. When he looked again, the child was gone.

Gabriel stepped on to the walkway. At the same time, on the opposite

side of the Quadrant, his own front door opened. It revealed the Witch. She stepped into the night and spoke his name, but louder still, the doll said, *Come to me.*

Gabriel began to run.

The Witch flew after him.

The Capper's legs tried to extend to their full length, compressing Simon Jenkins along the arch. 'Blimey,' he laughed, 'you gotta try this.'

The Doctor shouted the final sequence of Patrexian Numbers as he fiddled with the sash, trying to increase its output, and, at the same time, he dodged bricks being dislodged from the roof. He yelled, 'You're malfunctioning!'

'Don't you wish?' hissed the Capper. 'No mistake, man. The Vampire con-figuration, it's happening. Here comes the Imperative. Better stand back!'

Mrs Jericho ran along the walkway, blinded by tears. She could see Steven and he was walking, he was running – he was strong and tall, so much taller than his prototype. If he was scared of her, then no wonder. Her love was overwhelming.

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Just as she saw him disappear down the stairwell, someone grabbed her arm and heaved her back. It was Winnie Tyler. The unfit mother. Kind and friendly, oh yes, in the way that simple people are, but the complexities of the situation were beyond her. Winnie was shouting, telling her to stop, and Mrs Jericho looked at her with genuine puzzlement. Had Winnie lived so long in squalor that she had no concept of happiness? Eva could have a child who would prosper, Winnie could have the sick one. It was the only sort of boy a woman like her could make better in any way. It made such sense.

Mrs Jericho punched Winnie in the face. She staggered back and Mrs Jericho pushed her so that she fell against the parapet. Mrs Jericho moved in to press her elbow into the pit of Winnie's throat, pushing her further over the drop. Winnie's arms flailed and pulled at Mrs Jericho's hair, but Eva felt no pain. She clawed down with one hand to grab the legs and tilt Mrs Tyler over the edge. She was too stupid to understand, poor creature, and she'd had her chance. The authorities could find a mother for the new Gabriel. Social workers could do good

for once.

Now there was shouting. A blond boy, running from the flat in which Steven had hidden, and a girl – a girl with the look of a Tyler about her, sly, urchin eyes – running across the courtyard below and screaming for her mother.

Mrs Jericho felt Winnie tip backwards as she thought of Mrs Tyler's other children. The woman could not stop breeding, didn't know her luck. Winnie was stupid, but these children had grown used to her and Mrs Jericho only wanted them all to be happy. She pulled Winnie forward and let go of her.

Winnie sank to the floor, gasping for breath.

Mrs Jericho had more important things to do. Steven had got away. The blond boy ran up and he looked as though he would strike Mrs Jericho, until she stared at him. She could understand so much, now, just by looking. She saw in his deviant eyes a man who watched soap operas and thought that two women fighting was funny; a painless, camp diversion. He would never think so again, now that he saw Winnie clutching her throat for breath and the blood on Mrs Jericho's fist.

Mrs Jericho and the Voice pushed past him and ran for the stairwell.

The windows of the car shimmered like perpendicular sheets of oil. Gabriel stared at his own reflection. Come to me, said the boy locked in the interior, but his voice carried such pain that Gabriel was afraid. He took a step forward, he took a step back. There was no Glamour in his own mirror image, just a nine-year-old boy, frightened and lost.

Too late, he saw the swirl of black and red in the glass, and the Witch was upon him.

* * *

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'Couple more inches,' giggled the Capper. 'Vampire waveform confirmed. If you're still following.' These last words were lost as the N-form shoved itself through the roof and the interceptor began to disintegrate. The Capper was momentarily decapitated. His head fell towards the water before wires reeled it back in. 'Oops,' he grinned. Bumping all the way back up to its neck, the Capper's face frowned in concentration. Within its systems, energy reserved for the Imperative

alone was released, rushing along the conductors and lifting the creature with new strength.

He saw the Doctor yelp as the sash broke into flames and fell into pieces as tribophysical energy splashed across the tunnel. The intertrigo coruscated around the N-form, free at last to conduct new material through the dimensional wall. A myriad of pent-up tentacles rolled out and the legs found the height they had sought. The entire roof disintegrated, propelling the Capper into the world above.

The Capper rose into the Monday night sky and he hollered, 'All right, boys, let's *party*!' Even as he said this, the bravado slipped from his face as massive mechanisms wrapped themselves around his human form, huge, curved sheaths of steel and gold. The N-form took shape and the Capper was lost in the centre.

Masonry tumbled about the Doctor's ears and thick wedges of Maxwell Road tarmac plummeted into the water, The Doctor had no choice but to fling himself forwards on to the N-form. The Doctor grabbed hold of the last remaining leg and clung on for dear life. It hauled itself out of the sewer with a stowaway aboard.

Roz ran across the Quadrant. Far behind, the angry taxi driver followed, demanding payment. David Daniels was on the first-floor walkway, shouting about Mrs Tyler and Harry Harvey. Roz saw Winnie heading through the north exit, Bev chasing after her. She followed. All around, doors were opened in response to David's cries, and many of the Quadrant's inhabitants peered out into their last night.

Gabriel stood backed against the car, spotlit by the security lights. He had turned to face the Witch and she gazed into his face with wonder. She stood six feet away, as though he were too perfect to touch. Then Mum came running, but Gabriel saw that the little, skittering thing in her eyes had broken free, and he knew that she had done hateful things. Behind Mum came Bev, face bright pink with sunburn. She was crying hysterically. The Witch turned to face Mum, and Mum was terrified of her, stepping back as Bev hugged her 171

around the waist, like a five-year-old. But whatever was happening amongst these people, they all turned to face Gabriel, and Gabriel faced them.

The Witch stepped carefully towards him. She spoke like someone tempting a shy dog, saying, 'Just come here, come here, sweetheart,

your mother's here.'

Mum also stepped in Gabriel's direction, looking at the Witch with fear.

Gabriel was frightened and yet he marvelled at his own gifts; these adults could be controlled, like toys. He only had to *think*. He looked his mother in the eye and showed her what she wanted to see: her boy, smiling and safe.

Winnie stopped. Then he looked at Bev and pushed the image of Dad, bellowing, demanding that she gave him some peace. Bev's mouth snapped shut.

Finally, he looked at the Witch. He thought of being happy, of golden places under a foreign sun, and she stopped also, though her smile kept dancing.

Gabriel felt her mind, every bit as strong as his – and there, shifting underneath, something old and yet new, screaming in silence. Then it was gone. He knew that he could not hold her back for ever, but, for the moment, everything was calm.

One of the newcomers from flat 43, the woman, was walking into their midst. She walked carefully, prowling, as though she contained great violence.

She spoke in a low, careful voice, telling them all, it's all right, let's just step back and sort this out, good boy, Gabriel.

Then Gabriel looked into Roslyn Forrester's eyes.

He staggered back, barely hearing her shout, 'Get out of my head!' All the air was punched from his lungs and he gasped in the vacuum. In this woman's mind, Gabriel saw the rise and fall of the vortex, and space beyond space, creatures and futures without name and yet swarming with names, because they were real. Gabriel's charms were insignificant against such a panorama.

His spell broke. He covered his eyes and cried out. He was nine years old, he wanted his mother and his ordinary, small life.

The star-woman was shouting but both Mum and the Witch stepped forward to answer his cry.

The Witch looked at Mum with murder in her eyes.

Clunk

The car had been unlocked from the inside. Gabriel turned to look as the passenger door swung open.

The doll fell out. He heard screams behind him as the bleeding puppet-child shuddered on the pavement, then rolled on its side and reached for him. The thing's face was drying out, dust streaming from his face, his mouth, his eyes, and yet he spoke Gabriel's name.

Gabriel Tyler stepped forward, knowing at last. In his mind, huge worlds of light wheeled, then exploded, and he saw the truth. This was his doing. His spells and enchantments and oh-so-clever-tricks had been extorted from his 172

brother's soul, and this was the price. The boy was dying and it was Gabriel's fault.

He knelt down. He reached out one hand and touched the brittle skin. Then Gabriel burst into tears and he held his brother. Steven Jericho's death, nine and a half years in the making, finally came.

The Imperative was unleashed: the Capper's ultimate rush. Glowing in the firelight, the N-form unfurled bright wings of metal, a malevolent insect emerging from its cocoon.

Somewhere at its centre, Simon Jenkins was

screaming of things which no human brain was meant to comprehend and his final shreds of sanity slipped loose even as the N-form began its walk. With less elegance than its crown, it clambered over the houses of the Baxter estate, a mechanical daddylong-legs sprouting new appendages with every stride. It clattered over rooftops and through them, scything through soldiers, home-owners, anyone, crushing people underfoot in its descent upon the Quadrant.

It denied itself the tribophysical shift: the enemy was psychic, and the N-form wanted that waveform to twist with fear. It was enjoying its walk.

Across the country, eleven thousand people felt a peculiar itch in the middle of their beads.

The Doctor had been thrown clear into Maxwell Road, Ignoring his broken ribs, he looked up from the gutter to see the N-form unleashed. His head was spinning, but he could not afford the luxury of falling

unconscious. He picked himself up and ran after the war machine, following its path of devastation.

Chris was being driven in a UNIT jeep back to Maxwell Road. Suddenly, he heard gunfire from surrounding streets. The vehicle screeched to a halt and he looked around. Then he looked up and the driver slammed the jeep into reverse as the N-form strode towards them. It developed wide, Transformer feet which slammed closer and closer. The driver swung to the right. The N-form's cylindrical leg caught the car's left side and Chris, the driver and two soldiers pitched into the road.

Roz saw Gabriel screaming, Winnie screaming, Bev screaming, the Tyler family crying their torment aloud as Steven Jericho crumbled to dust and bones in his brother's arms. Grey sacs of internal fluid spilled at Gabriel's feet. The twin's paper skin ripped apart and only the skull had enough mass to thud against the concrete.

Roz heard more screams from the Quadrant and the distant sound of demolition – no, something wilder, more savage, buildings being torn apart and 173

scattered in a single blow. It felt as if a streamlined earthquake were heading towards the Quadrant and she ran back into the courtyard to look, already knowing what she would see. On all four sides of the housing block, people came out to watch, and, like Roz, they could only stare.

Mrs Jericho was extraordinarily calm. She looked at those around her and she could *hear* their thoughts. It was the same instinct which had enabled her, at fleeting moments, to know what people were going to say in advance.

It blossomed now, accelerated by the lights in Gabriel's mind. These lights had played upon her throughout the nine and a half years, but softly, filtered through the twin. The wasted child had not died in vain. He had passed something of himself on, changing Eva's mind and Eva's body.

Me me, me me, me me –

It was Voice, of course, becoming more than Voice. It was coming alive and moved within her.

Winnie Tyler was on her knees, scrabbling in the detritus, moaning Peter's name. Mrs Jericho could feel Winnie's mind and she no longer

hated or pitied her. She ached for the woman. Winnie burnt with her own fires, considering this her punishment. From the day she had sold her son, this had been walking the world and gaining in strength, earning its name: retribution.

Mrs Jericho turned her gaze to – yes, that was her name, Beverley. Her mind was raw. The poor girl was calling her mother all the names under the sun, but Mrs Jericho knew that the girl longed to hold Winnie, to never let go, but her loathing was too great and Bev was running away, to go home, to hide in her bed and never come out.

Finally, Mrs Jericho looked at little Gabriel. He feared her, she knew that, and she forgave him. He thought her a Witch, but he was desperate for forgiveness, his clothes painted with his brother's dust. He looked at Winnie, but she could only weep, and his heart burned with hatred at the things she had done. Slowly, cautiously, he turned his head to Eva. As she smiled at him, she saw the surrender unfold in his mind. He knew that a Witch's embrace was better than none. 'I know,' she whispered. 'I've seen the darkness, too. I can absolve you. I have tasted murder and survived. You can escape Gabriel. You can be Steven. Be my son and I'll protect you, I swear it.'

With a sad smile, she gestured to Gabriel to take her hand. Dry bones tumbled from his arms, and he came to her.

Gabriel Tyler became Steven Jericho.

Mrs Jericho pressed his head against her stomach and closed her eyes. A wondrous smile eased across her face. At last; at last she was happy.

She spoke to her son, and to his mother, and to the dust. 'The first Steven's released. I've watched him edge towards this death every day of his life. He's 174

happy at last, Winnie, I'm glad you could be with him. I've seen the funeral.

It's wonderful, I promise. If it's any comfort, Mrs Tyler, people will be so sorry for you.' She knew that Winnie could not understand and gently she wept for Mrs Tyler, who had raised her children from dirt and now saw her son return to that state. Mrs Jericho leant her head down to rest on her son's, her black hair tumbling around his face. She kissed him. 'There's a new Steven in the world, a fine and healthy boy. I'll look after him, Winnie, I promise. I'll make him happy and he can do the same for me.' She held the new Steven's face between her palms and said, 'You'll come with me, won't you? Just you and me, a

boy and his mother.' He nodded, then she pressed his head against her once more. They did not move: a statue in dedication to mother love.

Roz ran back from the courtyard, having seen what was coming, and for once in her life she could do no more than shout. To her horror, she saw Mrs Jericho holding Gabriel Tyler, while Winnie knelt at their feet as though in supplication, offerings of dust pouring through her fingers. Even then, with the night sky being blotted out behind her, Roz noticed the strangest thing. For a second, she thought that Mrs Jericho was breathing fast from the diaphragm, but the woman's chest heaved in a different rhythm. Her abdomen pulsed and stretched, pushing against Gabriel's head. Shocking amounts of blood coursed from between Mrs Jericho's legs.

Then the time for such details was past. Roz, Winnie, Gabriel and Mrs Jericho and everyone on the walkways looked up as the creature appeared over the Quadrant, an array of arms spread open in welcome.

The Capper had come home.

With its legs stationed at the Quadrant's centre, massive hydraulic joints at the midsection hissed open and the ancient machine hinged downwards, over the roof, sweeping the Capper towards the spotlight. His face struggled to make a joke – perhaps one last gasp of ' *The Big Time!* ' Then the stolen eyes of Scott Morris, the queerbasher, contracted to tiny pinpoints and the Capper said quietly, 'Oh Jesus Christ,' sensing that his time was past. The metal wings swooped inwards, then shot out, ripping Simon Jenkins in half and chucking him away, far across the estate. The Capper died for the last time. The N-form developed a jagged mouth in its crown, from which a blizzard of microfila-ments raged towards the designated Vampires.

Mrs Jericho screamed her fury at the machine as it descended upon them. She stood her ground, clamping both arms around her precious son.

In her flight from the Frei Institute, she had known that vengeance would pursue her, and now it came, in vile and alien form, to take her happiness 175

away. But she knew absolutely that she had done the right thing. She would not cower. She would meet this challenge, as she had met every challenge in her life.

She would survive; it was her only skill.

She felt the wires encompassing and penetrating herself and the child, seal-ing their embrace. The filaments burrowed into their skulls and even as they forged through brain tissue, she could feel the damage being mended. Eva and Steven were physically welded together, sheathed bonefingers coursing from one forehead to the other. Mrs Jericho had her son and they were never to be parted.

The creature pulled them both upward, to set them on high perhaps, initially, as trophies, but Mrs Jericho had other ideas.

Eva no longer screamed her rage. She had thought that this strange, venge-ful authority came to destroy her, but in the moment of contact, things had changed. She felt the machine register its surprise, and perhaps it tried to withdraw, but she had tasted its wonderful food.

Mrs Jericho did not die. She *expanded*.

Eva's mind had long since been a battlefield, upon which thoughts would collide and bleed. Steven and Alfred and Sally Hunt and the Voice boiled inside her skull, and sometimes she had thought that the sheer cacophany would kill her. But this – N-form, yes, the saviour's name was N-form allowed her space. Her thoughts were free, no longer constricted by her body. They filled the void, liberated at last, and rage became ecstasy.

On and on streamed Eva's mind. She touched upon ragged, clutching synapses which had lost their intelligence and had found a poor substitute in a common criminal. Eva brought them new hope. They were lonely and she could make them happy. Her thoughts rollercoasted on, battering down tired defences to plunge further, deeper.

The new Steven's mind was also in the system, but lost, too young to take control. It fell screaming through twisting ducts and junctions, unable to control its environment. Mrs Jericho reached out to help, gently lifting his mind and setting it back in his head, so he could sleep, wired to her arms.

The machine did not appreciate her beneficence. She felt sharp, spiny things – alarms? defences? – crying out their violation, but Mrs Jericho calmed them. Those she could not calm, she junked. If they did not recognize a miracle, then they had no part in her new realm. Her love had overwhelmed Steven and would do the same for the N-form.

The proof of her conviction came in the shape of vast flanges of gold

and thick bronze buttresses scorching from nowhere, from the Bevond, to surround the throne. It was a sign. The golden place had heard her call and came to her. It was not in the Alto Adige, it was all around, had always been 176

there, tucked out of sight in her own head. The sheets of gold caught the wind and lifted her above the wretched world below.

She had thought the machine a punishment, but it was a blessing. Now, at last, Mrs Jericho understood happiness. The likes of Sally Hunt would keep such delights private, confined to the elite, the giggling gang. Mrs Jericho was better than that. As she inclined her head to look down, she knew it her duty to bring happiness to one and all.

She would not keep this privilege to herself. She would be charitable and prove to those who hated or feared or mocked her, that they were wrong.

She saw little, running people. She gazed upon their miserable dwellings.

They should all live in the golden place. She reached out to them, and at the same time her growing awareness of this wondrous machine told her that she could reach the afflicted by thought alone. Spread across the British Isles, eleven thousand people had a means of being transported to paradise. All the mothers and all the children could come to her and play in the sunlight of her mind. It needed only her command.

Eva Jericho smiled. Across the country, eleven thousand engrams inside eleven thousand human heads opened.

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Chapter 12

For a second, but only a second, the engrams closed again as the N-form resisted the command. The hull, the size of three Cities of London, turned in an attempt to wrench its material back into the dimensional pocket.

There were few uncorrupted circuits left. Everything else had surrendered to the woman's mind. In the moment of connection, the machine had recognized the Doctor's diagnosis as correct. Searching out the Vampire waveform, analysis had downgraded in a

nanosecond. Freak mutation, screamed the archive. It had happened before – one of the pitfalls of War – and safety gates had ordered shutdown, but simultaneously, those systems were assaulted by a mind beyond resistance.

With the artificial intelligence downloaded, the N-form had fallen into re-gressive dependence on the human brain. The Imperative's impulse to assimilate a Vampire had discarded the Capper, but as a result, simulacra of human emotions wept in the core. Raw synapses of force-grown human flesh reacted by instinct, not intelligence. They sealed their wounds by latching on to the woman designated EvaJericho/Voice, and welcomed her. The female brain was richer than the male. The taste of the fat worm, the corpus coliseum, was rich and strong; intuition was found within, spurted into the N-form, and Gallifreyan technology mimicked its discovery. In this organic replication, the N-form was lost and confused. EvaJericho/Voice could take its pain away. The machine welcomed her as a mother.

Alarms began to burn within the hull as control was torn away. Splintering logic directives cried out for the Doctor, even as the fight was lost and material shot through engrams into the physical world.

Eleven thousand people died, to begin with, as tiny mouths in their brains vomited metal into the skull. The N-form should have extruded its entire mass, but it clung to the dimensional tuck like a spinster in a storm. Where tons of material should have breached, there passed through each vent only enough matter to build a can Nevertheless, it was enough to kill, and everyone who had taken the cocaine exploded.

Their names are too numerous to be listed. These victims joined the ranks of the Doctor's fallen extras, forgotten as soon as they died, casualties of the War.

Schoolchildren perished, as did their teachers and their parents. Television executives were particularly numerous, and alongside them there fell junkies, 179

dock workers, students, bank clerks, the unemployed, housewives, butchers and bakers, soldiers, typists, mechanics, bar staff, two priests and a High Court judge. The number would have been higher if the Capper had not tried to offload the drug at bargain prices. Many had been suspicious and preferred higher prices, a guarantee of quality.

Each victim felt a second's pain and a momentary awareness of the

top of their skulls lifting. Then, they knew no more while those around them screamed. The N-form surged out in any shape, all shapes, its liquid metal base shifting with artistic flair. Each device tugged its way out into the world, new-born, struggling against the demands of the hull to return.

Dr Polly Fielding, who had tried to save the Capper's life in South Park casu-alty, was reclining on her bed, smoking a post-coital cigarette, hearing vaguely the sirens from afar. In the bathroom, her married lover and boss, Dr Clive Hanophy, was brushing his teeth. He always did this after sex, which infuriated her. She was just deciding to finish with him, again, when he finished her.

He staggered out of the bathroom with a wide coaxial cable shuddering from the place where his head had been. Polly screamed and died. Her cigarette fell to the floor and started another fire.

Ida Constantino, whose father had won the Pools, sat on her bed and admired her pink Reeboks with silver laces. Dad's winnings had moved Ida into better societies than her boring, common friends in the Quadrant – ignorant, sulky girls like Bev Tyler. On the new estate, she had friends who went abroad for the summer, and of course, they took drugs at their parties and thought themselves very daring. Smiling, Ida experimented with a strawberry lip-gloss, before she shattered into hoops of gold. The metal lassoed around the necks of the other, sleeping Constantinos, and pulled tight.

In the Gas Oil Club, several weary dancers paused, then were decapitated, their heads skimming across the room to slaughter and escape. A globe with six-inch ceramic teeth bounced towards the Frei Institute's receptionist. She met it square-on and punched it in the face. It skittered into the corner and decided to try elsewhere. The receptionist downed her drink and walked out of the wreckage. Her name was Judy Summerfield and she wanted a curry.

Closer to the epicentre, Carl Tyler's mate, Beefy Jackson, fell from his bike as his head opened into four sections, like a metal tulip. On the second floor of the Quadrant, Beefy's grandma, whose grandson had sprinkled cocaine on her birthday cake as a joke, grew jointed arms from her forehead and used her zimmer frame to bludgeon to death the occupants of flats 53,54 and 55. On 180

the opposite walkway, two of the Evans children found metal snakes coursing out of their necks and the rest of the family were devoured. Irene Leather, who never touched coke, preferring nicotine, watched

as her husband and fourteen-year-old Tanya lay side by side and died, their faces revealing thick, blunt glass fingers which knitted together and then flung themselves out of the window to join the core.

And poor Winnie Tyler: even she felt the itch in her head expand into unbearable pain. She had remained kneeling in the debris of her son as the machine lifted Mrs Jericho and Gabriel into the Quadrant's centre. The chaos was only part of the retribution which she had invited upon herself. Perhaps she was even glad as she clutched her head and felt something break inside; she deserved no better. As blood waterfalled in front of her eyes, she remembered: Two weeks earlier, and Carl was in the doghouse. Winnie was cleaning his room when she found a fold of paper wedged into the gap between windowsill and wall. She screamed at Carl, her worst Temper in years. After all she had said, all she had done, he brought this filth into the flat where Gabriel could find it. Carl looked pathetic, mumbling that it was his first and last time – he'd finished school and wanted to celebrate.

'Celebrate?' roared Winnie, and she shoved the envelope in Carl's face. His attempt to tell her that it only cost a fiver, not the usual fifty quid, infuriated her further. 'Let's all celebrate, shall we? Come on, we're a family, let's see Gabriel shove this up his nose, let's see Bev choke on it, let's all join in.' She slammed the paper against her mouth, showering her face with white powder, shouting, 'Just watch me. Only costs a fiver. Watch me use the money I spend on clothes and food and the bloody television licence on this, is that what you'd like, Carl? For us to join the filth and the parasites, join the Capper's mob? Come on, have some. Let's enjoy it.'

Carl started crying, but her Temper did not abate. She sent him to his room, saying he'd have no money for the rest of the year and she was taking his new jeans right back to the shop. Once his bedroom door had closed, Winnie sat on the floor and despaired, while a red, hungry engram opened in the dura mater of her brain.

Now, the damaged tissue yawned and Winnie felt only a blessed relief as a crest of bronze divided her skull. It sent out tendrils to the golden place and lifted her entire body into that realm.

Across the Quadrant, Carl banged his head to Bon Jovi and his head fell off.

Roz had run back into the Quadrant as Mrs Jericho and Gabriel were lifted aloft, but then was trapped as the machine poured out of the central breach.

A river of molten metal oozed out and up, lifting woman and child into the 181

starless night. Now, the north exit was sealed off and lava was rolling towards Roz, intertrigal light searing the edges as it engulfed her taxi driver.

Roz backed against the wall. To her left, Beefy Jackson's head had closed into a solid metal helmet, studded with knives. It bounced towards her.

Inside Mrs Jericho's new mind, she could see the pattern. It was a map of cocaine distribution, spreading haphazardly as dealer sold to client, client passed to friend, friend became dealer, and so on, the branches dividing expo-nentially. A small number of strands trailed across the United Kingdom, but mostly the web centred upon the city. Now, the spikes of the chart splashed red with both an individual death and the deaths of those in the vicinity of every breach. Mrs Jericho smiled. Each death was that person's passport to paradise.

To Mrs Jericho, every sliver of metal represented an extension of her own self. It was the one thing she had prayed for glorious, instantaneous birth, eleven thousand times over. Her children were being born.

Mrs Jericho summoned them home, children to mother, speaking of a golden place in which they could all be united. They need not fight, the War was won and they could dwell in safety, in the Heaven shaped by her hand.

The extensions began the journey home; EvaJericho/Voice was calling across the world.

The best view of the convergence was afforded to those watching from the Frei Institute. Nurse Monica Jeffries and the security guard stood at the top-floor window and looked at the city. They knew that Hell had arrived on Earth.

To the east, the fire raged, and now a small metal mountain seemed to be rising in the south, shrouded in lightning. Then, from all around, separate pockets of devastation seemed to erupt. At first, Monica thought they were fireworks, sparkling in hoops around the city. Small glints of light arced through the air trailing streams of bluish-white electricity. Then she realized that these were metal objects. They took many shapes, but mostly they were round, the size of heads. Some smashed their way along the ground like bowling balls, shattering

houses and roads en route, some became bouncing bombs, looping high in the air, falling to earth, then shooting upwards again.

Dozens punched through the twin towers at the city centre, and the by-pass became littered with car crashes as some objects took recognizable routes, spinning down the fast lane. The heart of the city became alive with fire and shrapnel, a boiling cloud of destruction. Then, as Monica watched, the con-centric rings of violence contracted, being pulled into the mountain of gold.

The Frei Institute stood against open moorland and behind that, the sea, so it remained intact. Nevertheless, Monica Jeffries was crying. Without a word, 182

she untied Dr Greco. She knew that death would soon claim them and she did not think it fair that any man should remain defenceless. Then, slowly, she walked back to the window, hypnotized by the city's end.

The guard was sobbing and he muttered the names of his daughters, a desperate prayer. Monica held his hand. She thought of Nick and their son, Callum, six months old; she knew that she would never see them again.

Very quietly, Dr Greco slipped away.

As Beefy Jackson's head chattered towards Roz, she backed into the plank which the Leathers used as a bench. She heaved it in a horizontal arc and smacked the head back into the wall. From there, it rebounded on a new course, heading for the central mass, which even now unfolded into a throne for Mrs Jericho.

Roz realized that the prime intent of all these separate extensions was to join the centre. The security lights had gone out, but in the strobe of the intertrigo she could see hundreds of extensions hurtling over the Quadrant's roof. Wires whipped out from the central mass as umbilical cords. The extensions became satellites, sizzling through the air, lashing out indiscriminately.

A wire whiplashed and bit through Roz's forearm. She staggered back and shouted a warning to Mr Djanogly, the Quadrant's unofficial caretaker. He was standing outside his flat and a playful glass frond weaved in front of him. He was muttering something; perhaps he was simply telling it to go away. Then the frond's edge sharpened and whittled down, slicing him in half, vertically.

Roz ran. Above her she caught a glimpse of Bev Tyler standing on the first-floor walkway. She was outside her front door, screaming at the monstrosity.

Roz could not help her. She had greater priorities. The machine's emer-gence meant that the Doctor and Chris could be dead and she would have to fight alone. She flung herself into the north exit's alcove and saw Beefy's bike lying on its side. She lifted it, straddled the engine and fled the Quadrant.

Once outside, she screeched round in a tight circle and drove back in because a wave of extensions was descending upon her. There were seven heads linked in a chain, all with bright blades flicking as tongues. Roz recognized the remnants of faces as the Leathers' girls. If she was going to die, it would not involve being cut to ribbons by mechanical prostitutes.

Returning to the courtyard, which flickered with light like an infernal dis-cotheque, Roz drove straight towards the centre. Metal swirled upwards at the base, corkscrewing Mrs Jericho aloft; the bike bit the metal, which was fluid and yet solid, and Roz drove on, executing a 180-degree turn and eleva-tion. She separated from the bike as it left the spiral and flew through the air.

She managed to grab hold of the first-floor parapet, which shook as the bike ploughed into the brickwork below.

She hauled herself on to the walkway. Bev was still outside her open front door, transfixed, screaming. Events had brought Roz to save the child after all. She ran to Bev, picked her up and dragged her into flat 41, slamming the door shut, even as the walls began to crack.

The Doctor stood half a mile away from the Quadrant, in Exeter Street, and beheld Mrs Jericho at the N-form's summit.

Everything had fallen from his grasp. He had never seen this woman before.

He knew nothing.

He ran through the night, rapidly assessing the situation. The scenario presented certain promising aspects. The N-form's greater mass had stayed in the pocket dimension. Also, the machine was designed to destroy entire continents within minutes, but this manifestation

seemed to have some intent which, while deadly, did not depend on disciplined massacre. He saw from its shape that it was conforming to human spatial awareness, centring itself in the Quadrant rather than spilling out across the country – or perhaps, he noted grimly, this was an innate Patrexian flair for finding a showcase.

The Doctor tucked his lists away for later consideration as a more immediate concern presented itself. Behind him, but catching up rapidly, a barrage of N-form extensions thundered along, filling the terraced streets with lightning.

People stood in their doorways, gaping, and were cut down. Some were saved at the last second as a convoy of UNIT vehicles shot out of Minto Road. The extensions seemed to descend upon the troops with particular glee, shredding and chopping in a frenzy of blood. Then, with no time for the Doctor to find shelter, the devices interlinked and fell upon him. He covered his head with his hands and closed his eyes.

The N-form particles passed overhead, leaving a shower of roofing tiles, bricks and tom clothing in their wake. The Doctor caught the faint telepathic trace streaming behind them. Though primitive, the extensions – children, why did he now think of them as *children*? – recognized the Gallifreyan genotype and left him unharmed. The Doctor looked at the Quadrant with renewed vigour. 'Right,' he said, and started running.

The trace lingered with one other clue – that EvaJericho/ Voice was in control. The woman who had bought Winnie Tyler's son now possessed the N-form. The Doctor had thought her an insignificant part of the equation, but somehow she contained a variant of the Vampire waveform. This knowledge was the Doctor's only weapon as he charged into the arena, shouting for Christopher Cwej.

Mrs Jericho had found perfect synthesis with Voice. Perhaps Voice loved her, perhaps Voice despaired of her, but this new, vast mind could contain them 184

both. They could be happy. There was enough room for every thought Mrs Jericho had ever had, without conflict; let each of them find a space within the golden realm. Within, she could feel her lesser motives steal into dark corners of the machine and burrow deep, but she allowed it. Nothing should be stifled, not any more.

She touched upon the shadow-thoughts, briefly. There, she felt a jagged, bloody part of her mind which feared the things Eva had done

in human form, and which dreaded the establishment, the officials, the doctors and the social workers coming to take her away. These thoughts controlled smaller portions of N-form and set about the murder of anyone in uniform, the representatives of authority.

Smiling, Eva turned her gaze to a different shell of consciousness, which glowed in a warm coat of contentment. This part of her mind was shopping.

Its grasping hands reached into the Baxter estate, finding unique purchases.

They lifted corpses to the summit, to compact them into steps leading to Mrs Jericho's feet.

Deeper inside, a bleeding chasm roared Sally Hunt's name. She still existed, somewhere in the world, and Eva could now reach any place. This section's bulk begged to scour the Earth, but Mrs Jericho told it to wait. Vengeance upon the woman would be more satisfying when the golden realm was complete, and Sally Hunt could understand her exile, before dying.

Above this, in a hollow refracted with opalescent light, a remembrance of little Monica Jeffries glittered. The thought began to grow, slowly, deliciously.

Mrs Jericho and Voice contained and grew stronger than these disparate elements. She composed the core's architecture with precision and style and her chamber took shape, a hundred feet above the ground. She bled the metal from the walls so that sheets of isinglass surrounded her, and arches of rippling, translucent oil stretched into spires above the onyx triptych flanking her body. In defiance of the endless night, she focused the intertrigal light into broad sweeps of pale yellow, reaching above and below.

With Steven in her arms, Mrs Jericho felt beautiful at last. In her first life, she had aspired to being smart and elegant, but saw no actual beauty in the mirror. Now she had matured into magnificence; her hair took shape as thousands of steel strands, writhing from her skull, sleek and shining and controllable.

She looked down upon those still in in darkness. They had lived their fives so long in shadow that they feared the light. Mrs Jericho's mind reached out and she recognized the pain beneath their terror. These lost souls were trapped in silence, scared of their own flesh, their own blood. She had once been the same. But now she could reach them,

cut them, releasing the bile and cleansing them.

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She knew that they were *all* children, every individual born of woman. They all needed to be with her, part of her. She would liberate them and bring them to sit at her right hand. Around her, she had already begun to carve out friezes of the ascension, hanging her palace walls with the bodies of Winnie Tyler and her son Carl, Jack Leather, the Evans children, countless others. They adorned the walls of Heaven.

Mrs Jericho descended, to meet the Chosen. She pivoted around the Quadrant, feeling the wind on her face. The Thomas family screamed aloud, but her fingernails sparkled. Mother, father, boy, girl and grandfather were lifted in ecstasy to be impacted into her wall. She squashed them into a deep-red alcove, alongside a child called Sam and his mother. Fleetingly, Mrs Jericho heard Steven's mind screaming Sam's name, but she calmed him and moved on.

Behind another wall, a couple cowered, fearful of her gift. She felt their names: Mr and Mrs Skinner. As Eva came closer, she saw the woman look strangely pensive, ignoring her husband's screams. Then, with a vicious grin, Mrs Skinner pushed him into Mrs Jericho's embrace. He struggled, but the knives of Heaven claimed him. Eva smiled her gratitude at Mrs Skinner, her apostle, knowing that at least someone understood.

Mrs Jericho wheeled her crusade to the east side. Here, two in torment, sheltering in a cave. The deviant boy and an old man. The fear in their eyes shouted their names: David Daniels and Harry Harvey. Both had fallen to the floor in misery and bugged each other, frightened of their own salvation. The old man – Capper memories remembered him from the graveyard – saw her as the Devil, but he would soon forgive her. The tableau awaited both men.

Mrs Jericho extended the throne towards them.

David had run back into flat 28 as the Capper had brought his machine striding into the Quadrant. The ceiling had started to collapse and the lights had gone out, so David found himself cast in the slow-motion light of the strobe as he ran into the bedroom, with the vague notion of sheltering underneath Harry.

Instead, Harry had grabbed hold of David and kept trying to hug him. David was still shouting at him as the front wall was lifted away, smoothly, like a science-fiction sliding door, and the woman appeared.

Now, both men clutched each other, Harry praying aloud as a platform eased the woman forward. Her skin was laced with wires and cables and a boy was buried in a fibrous lattice in her arms, while the framework of the surrounding machine ran with blood. David could see faces he recognized pushed flat into the dripping walls. He wept as blades grew from the platform, heading for them.

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Harry looked away from his approaching death. He stared above his head and called out Sylvie's name.

Anomaly.

Perception circuits in the N-form, staring through Mrs Jericho's eyes, registered the discrepancy and caused the throne to pause. The image was replayed, but the fault defied analysis. The replay of David Daniels and Harry Harvey shunted backwards and forwards, but the anomaly – a blur around the old man's head – seemed to shift one frame ahead, then one frame back, with every shunt. The only thing to register was a flaw in the spectrum, a vaporous colour

Green.

Jade-green.

Jade-green and diamond.

It was there, then it was gone, the anomaly making safety systems pull the throne back. Mrs Jericho rose out of their flat, to return to the summit.

The N-form struggled to make sense of the incident, hypothesizing that the N-Space conduit had allowed a traveller access, but Mrs Jericho had no need of theory. She understood. These men were already saved, not by her, but by one of her kind.

David was still crying as the woman receded. He could not tell whether Harry was sobbing or laughing. Then the old man heaved himself around and laid one forearm alongside David's. Both had cuts and were bleeding profusely.

David did not understand as Harry looked at both men's skin, then into David's face, his eyes shining with tears.

'You see?' whispered Harry and he seemed joyous. 'Both of us, David.

All this time, we've been the same. You and me, we're the same.'

Mrs Jericho expanded further. She released the buttresses, and the north and south walls of the Quadrant were demolished in a single sweep. Eva unfolded her many arms to harvest more souls.

Old Mrs Hearn ran from her second-floor flat, screaming. She knew that the north wall ahead had gone and the pitching walkway accelerated her to the edge, but even if she could have stopped, she would not have done so.

With the north wall fallen, Eileen could see the fires of the city, a travesty of her beautiful sunsets. Ever since the Capper's suicide, flames and smoke had haunted her dreams, and now those dreams were manifest, coming to claim her. The inferno reflected even in the golden wall at the Quadrant's centre, which wheeled in her direction.

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The gas main exploded inside flat 71 and Mrs Hearn was engulfed by the roll of flame as the ground beneath her feet tumbled away. She fell with her mind on fire, still screaming as she dashed upon the rubble of her weeping world. Mrs Hearn's fife had kept many silences, but she was unquiet in death.

In flat 41, on the west wall, the floor tilted to the left as the entire building began to collapse. Roz held on to Bev. The girl was still struggling, sobbing hysterically.

Then Roz saw bronze scoops simply remove the front wall of the flat and the sizzling intertrigo illuminated the room. Flat, sharp tentacles snaked forward and their purpose was clear; the previous attacks had been undisciplined, almost accidental, but now they came to kill.

Roz dragged Bev back to the window, but on the ground outside, a metal peninsula peaked into hungry spikes, ready for anyone stupid enough to jump.

Bev screamed as the blades surged towards them.

Winnie Tyler was not dead. In rupturing her skull, the N-form crest had preserved tissue, assimilating her mind. In the decay of her thoughts, Winnie understood why. A small, pedantic logic circuit told her that she had created Gabriel's genotype and was being stored for analysis.

Now, her eyes were bursting with visions from the N-form's receptors. Winnie saw ribbons of steel, preparing to lash out. Behind them, she saw a face –

red, wild with tears, screaming.

' *Bev*,' cried Winnie.

Her daughter was in danger.

Winnie Tyler found her Temper at last.

Knowing the action would kill her, Winnie found the strength to press both palms against the metal struts and compressed flesh on either side. The blood acted as adhesive, but Winnie heaved against the suction. Gritting her teeth, she pulled power from the machine. It intoxicated her, stronger than any alcohol. Yelling with rage, she pushed her body out of the nightmare wall.

She felt part of her skull staying behind as she fell, past the remnants of Carl, to Mrs Jericho below.

Flailing wildly, Winnie grabbed hold of the woman's alien hair and she pulled and pulled. Mrs Jericho screamed.

The tentacles shuddered, as though experiencing an internal failure. Roz could see only one way out. The living room had split open – they would have to jump down on to the ground floor.

Roz tried to grab hold of Bev, but the girl was frenzied, kicking and scratching. Roz slapped her, roared, 'This is no time to be a bloody teenager,' and 188

tried to wrap her arms around Bev's stomach. She heaved them both forward, twisting so that her own body would cushion Bev's fall. But at the last second, Bev wriggled free, just as the floor crumbled beneath them.

Roz slammed into the rubble and she screamed aloud – not from the pain of impact, but from knowing that she had landed on top of Bev Tyler.

Roz scrabbled to her feet. The girl was unmoving. Then the roof began to collapse.

Mrs Jericho held Winnie's face. The two women stared at each other,

then Mrs Jericho mouthed the words, ‘I’m Sorry.’

She grew two-foot-long talons from her fingers and shredded Winnie Tyler.

The rags of flesh were discarded, and the N-form junked any remaining traces of Winnie’s brain pattern: she was dead.

Mum! yelled Steven’s mind, rocketing to the surface as Winnie died. He struggled, ripping connecting cables from his temples and punching with soft fists inside his cocoon. He screamed for his mother again and again, as Eva stroked his wire-bound cheek and said softly ‘I’m here precious, I’m here.’

His ungrateful words pierced her heart: *You’re not my mother,* just as he had screamed the first time they met. He would not be still and the entire machine lurched and groaned in sympathy with the struggle. Mrs Jericho saw her Heaven tilt at an alarming angle and the light began to die. She had never dealt with an ordinary child, with ordinary passions, and she despaired.

Then, as she perceived what had to be done, she smiled with infinite sadness. She probed a finger of her mind into Steven’s head – *My name’s Gabriel!*

came his last cry – and she flicked his consciousness out, discarding it through a waste duct. He would still be happy; Mrs Jericho could ensure it. Gently, she placed a cell of her own consciousness inside his empty head and he became meek and quiet. Now, he was truly her child.

A tear of blood fell down Mrs Jericho’s cheek. She whispered, her voice stressed with machine harmonics, ‘You were right all along, Winnie. Copies, that’s the best we can hope for. Little copies of ourselves.’

Then she recommenced her righteous work.

She could feel one individual free from the attentions of her metal children. They seemed to avoid this man, directed by some allegiance of old. Mrs Jericho concentrated, and the allegiance was forgotten.

The Doctor had continued his charmed path to the Quadrant, but there was no sign of Chris. Panicking, the Doctor had thought that some Quadrant flats would store the vital cocaine. Running became mountaineering as he clambered over the debris of the north wall.

Then, to his horror, the N-form grew wise to his ways. A spar of metal oozed from the base, turning in his direction, and he heard the telepathic field whisper with regret:

There is a new mistress on high. This is Heaven, not Gallifrey, and there shall be War with the world below, until all the children of the universe stand in the realm.

He sprinted for the only cover, the east wall, which loomed precariously overhead. The stairwell crumbled even as the Doctor ran up, and on the walkway he saw a curve of gold sharpen into a giant axe. He threw himself into the Williamses' living room, jumped over the family's corpses and retreated against the window as the axe chopped its way towards him.

Then the Doctor felt the floor surge beneath him and the entire window frame seemed to lift into the air. The Doctor was pushed forwards and the axe raised up, but then the floor was gone and the Doctor fell.

He fell half a metre, then stopped. For a second, he thought he was floating on solid air, wafting away from the Quadrant's outer wall.

Then the Doctor recognized the dirty-yellow scoop into which he had fallen.

He turned around and looked down the length of the hydraulic arm. Chris was driving the bulldozer, stolen from Red Hamlets, and he gave the Doctor a cheery wave, reversing the vehicle at top speed.

The Doctor shouted for the cocaine, but Chris could not stop as huge slugs of N-form metal escaped the Quadrant to pursue the JCB. The 122 horsepower engine squealed in protest and the bulldozer heaved backwards over the ruins.

The N-form seemed particularly intent on claiming the Doctor. He saw the slugs solidify into a thick, wide battering-ram which surged through the rubble towards them, faster than the vehicle's clumsy, slow trundle.

The Doctor pulled himself out of the scoop and balanced on the upper edge.

Taking a deep breath, he ran down the arm and slammed into the

cabin, to see Chris's smiling face.

Chris stopped smiling. The Doctor turned to see the battering-ram rearing up in the air, poised to descend.

'The cocaine!' shouted the Doctor.

He saw that Chris was trapped in the cabin, having to use combined foot and hand levers to keep the treads rolling. Instead, Chris punched through the windscreen, and the Doctor grabbed the cocaine envelope from his bleeding fist. He shoved it in his mouth.

He felt his mind blister, a tongue of metal probing through the gap. Then he focused on a mental chant of Old Gallifreyan which few Time Lords would dare to use, and the engram came under his control.

The N-form plunged downwards but seemed to meet an invisible cone which parted it into two streams, running either side of the bulldozer.

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But if the Doctor had expected to gain complete control of the machine, he now realized the strength of his enemy. He could feel Mrs Jericho's mind, twin stars of madness and pain in perpetual revolution, blistering his consciousness. Her work continued. The metal avoided the bulldozer but had not stopped, and the sounds of chaos still came from all around. Above the Quadrant, the N-form's crown was turning to face the Doctor and Chris with new interest, light coruscating around Mrs Jericho.

The Doctor could see that Chris now had a gun – standard UNIT issue. 'Give it to me.'

Chris took the gun from the waistband of his jeans and passed it to him.

The Doctor weighed the Hekler Koch MP5 in his hand. 'What are you going to do?' asked Chris.

'I'm going to stop Mrs Jericho.'

Despite the distance, the Doctor could see the woman looking down at him.

She smiled, and beckoned, and fire danced around her head.

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Eva Jericho let the little man approach. She lifted him into the throne room on a disc of silver, like a meal served on a platter. His face was grave. He carried a gun, though he handled the weapon as if it would contaminate him. Around them, everything was still. Snakes and blades and teeth did not stir and light shone through the chamber floor, illuminating the faces of her chosen people in their crimson frieze. Paradise was at peace as Mrs Jericho received her ambassador from the lowly places.

Eva looked into his eyes and saw so much there: the galaxies and vortices from her archives turned in this man's stare, and she saw the terrible weight he carried. She knew he would recognize what she had done. He had committed crimes in the name of salvation himself.

'You understand, don't you?' said Eva, softly. 'We're making them happy, Steven and I. Mother and child bestowing their gifts upon the world. This is paradise, little man, why don't you accept it? Does it frighten you so much?'

The little man said nothing, but Eva felt his mind shift in the machine as he probed every corner. She knew that he had expected to be King of this realm, and indeed, traitors within the machine cried out for his coronation; but she had control and would not allow it.

'No,' she said. 'Eden unlocked its gates to me, and the garden is shaped in my image. You can't have the keys. But you should rejoice. There is no God, so I have built Heaven on Earth. A golden place for all the mothers and all the children, in which we can all prosper. I'm helping the world escape its pain.'

Then she added quietly, 'No one helped me. I spent my life surrounded by people, and all alone.'

Finally, he spoke, although his voice was a whisper. 'Mrs Jericho. I'm sorry.

I truly am.' Then he lifted his gun and shot her in the face, three times.

The bullets penetrated her brain tissue, but the N-form repaired the damage even as it happened and the wounds sealed themselves. Sadly, she looked at the little man, catching a glimpse of his consciousness inside the machine, fleeing from her. She guessed his intent: knowing her invulnerable, he had thought nonetheless that Mrs Jericho's

retention of human form was her weakness; that the bullets would not kill her, but the *thought* of being shot would.

'Oh, little man,' said Eva. 'You come as assassin. I thought you came as 193

consort or lover. Or father to Steven.' Then for a second, she touched his mind again, and added slyly, 'No. You would make a terrible father.'

He continued to stare.

His silence caused anger to boil in her metal

synapses. She hissed, 'Why don't you understand? Your mind is so full of stars, you've forgotten the people. Men and women live in misery, the children are not safe. I had nine years of pain, *nine years*. But no more.' She wrapped her human arms around Steven, the child mummified in wires. She said softly, 'The golden place is for them – the descendants. All those below are children and they are lost. But they can be *my* children. You can't decide what is right or wrong here, you've no children of your own. You can never know; the things you would do for your children are for ever outside your knowledge. Poor little man.'

'Mrs Jericho,' he said solemnly, 'you're killing them. You're controlling the slaughter of innocent people.'

'No,' she cried. 'You can't see, so few of you can see. They won't stop crying. The children and the women, they won't stop crying. I can hear them all, across the world, why won't they stop?'

'You must stop first, Mrs Jericho. Please.'

She looked at the little man, considering his words. Then, sadly, she shook her head. 'They'll understand in time and they'll thank me. I'm making them safe. They'll stop crying, in this Heaven.'

The man paused, then reached into his pocket. He took out a mirror. He held the glass towards Eva and said, 'Look.'

There she was: the woman Eva had glimpsed in the Thompson house, the feral creature, now wilder and soaked in blood. Cables tore at her skin and the eyes were staring, bulging, almost bursting apart. Eva pitied the wretch, and feared her, until the little man spoke again.

‘It’s you.’

Eva looked deeper, then deeper again. Slowly she became aware of a sound, a guttural moan; it ripped from her own throat as Eva finally saw herself. The reflection wept also, two Evas in unison.

‘You see what you’ve become?’ said the man. ‘Now stop, Eva. Stop.’

An entire minute passed in silence as each Eva stared at the other. Then a weary smile stole across both faces, and Eva saw her reflection mouth the words, ‘No. The work continues. Heaven shall exist. And if I suffer, then so be it. I suffered as a child, and as a mother, and if I suffer now, then I’ll survive.

I always do. It’s all I’m good at.’ A lock of bronzed hair curled out, lifted the mirror from the man’s hand and dashed it against the platform.

The man seemed to grow colder, looking beyond Eva, into the machine.

‘If you won’t listen, the N-form must understand. The dimensional breaches were designed to be scattered. By bringing them together, you threaten the 194

Earth’s stability. The entire planet could fall into the void. It’s time for this to end.’

Eva’s smile was dark and empty. ‘All my life, men have told me what to do.

Husbands and shopkeepers, solicitors and social workers. Not any more.’ In defiance, she raised her right arm. Below, a huge sheet of gold reared into the air and sharpened at one end, forming a plough two hundred feet high.

‘Don’t –’ said the little man, but a separate thought broke free in Mrs Jericho’s mind and she would seize the idea, use it as proof of the little man’s impotence.

Nurse Monica Jeffries, said the thought. *She helped us to the golden place and yet stays distant. She carries an unborn child. Let the child be the firstborn in paradise, so it might never know the misery of Earth.*

In the window of the Frei Institute, Monica Jeffries and the guard could not look away from the burning city. In the distance, at the foot

of the strange mountain, they saw clouds of shrapnel rise as something new took shape.

‘ *Mrs Jericho* –’ raged the little man, but she smiled and sent the N-form on its mission.

Monica saw something sweep down the valley – it looked like a giant plough, leaving shattered streets in its wake. Then it began to climb the incline, perhaps heading for the moors.

I forbid this –’ shouted the man, and he was careless in his anger. Eva felt his mind spike, touching hers. She knew his name.

‘Doctor?’ hissed Eva. She lifted her head. Her hair writhed around Steven, to protect him, as she summoned the contempt which had soured her heart for decades. Her voice was glacial. ‘Yes. You would be a doctor.’

Doctors would be banished from the realm. Doctors were liars, doctors pried too deep, doctors would know her every sin and tell the world. Eva issued a silver wire from her forehead, to arc across and enter the little man’s head. His mind would be extracted and thrown out with the waste. The wire reached his skull and she saw his pain.

Monica realized that the plough was curving towards the Frei Institute. The guard cried out and ran, but Monica did not move, somehow knowing that she could not escape. The metal wave carved through the industrial wasteland, heading for her and her alone.

In the moment of connection, Eva blinked. The little man had touched upon Voice. It pleased her that the Doctor would know her constant friend before 195

his death and it seemed that Voice surged forwards to greet him. Eva felt Voice’s desire, that the Doctor might baptize it and give Voice its proper name.

The plough filled the windows and Monica Jeffries screamed her son’s name.

‘Oh Mrs Jericho,’ breathed the Doctor. A time-worn sadness shadowed his brow. Then he frowned in concentration. ‘I have to do this, Eva. And I hope that you believe me – I’m giving you what you want.’ He seemed to be crying.

Eva felt pain.

The plough stopped, ten feet from the Frei Institute. Monica stood in the window, weeping and thanking God.

Eva looked down as Voice came alive. It was straining at the flesh of her stomach, from within, tearing and ripping, without the machine's power to heal as it destroyed. Eva screamed, losing the electronic roar from her voice as her skin pulsed and broke.

The convulsing mass pushed against Steven. He was forced from her embrace and he fell through the open floor to the ground below, his supporting wires snapping apart.

From within Eva Jericho, a small, red, wet hand pushed into the air.

Voice was alive. Voice was being born.

Voice was a monster.

Eva howled her agony as her child was born at last. It had been hidden inside her, crouched in half-life, masquerading as Voice, trying to talk to its mother for all these years. The double-pulse of Voice was the baby's heartbeat echoing inside her, trying to signal its presence. It was a half-formed creature of flesh and stone, its vestigial body climbing out of her own, fingers withered into claws, a lipless mouth gasping for air. Even now, flakes of flint scattered from its arms as it turned to behold its host with blind eyes. Perhaps it tried to speak. Perhaps it tried to call her mother.

Eva Jericho's mind fled in horror.

The Doctor had finally connected with the core of Mrs Jericho's mind. He had known that the gun would not kill Eva and used it only to madden her, to focus her dislocated mind so that he could enter and find the truth. Now, he saw to his horror that the truth was as deadly as any bullet. He knew that only a terrible insanity could drive Eva this far and even he flinched from the source of her madness. He had found her vampire.

'Lithopaedian,' said the Doctor. He had no choice but to summon it into existence, channelling the N-form's skill in manufacturing human flesh. He 196

prompted the work begun by Steven Jericho to its conclusion and watched as the stone child tore its mother apart.

He should have known. All the secrets of these events were buried in

the people, in their hearts and in their bodies, in silence.

He saw that Mrs Jericho's last pregnancy had not ended in miscarriage. The extrauterine foetus conceived by Eva and Alfred Jericho had lodged outside the womb, in the pelvis, there to die and calcify; an entirely natural occurrence. In a sling of membranes, absorbing calcium salts, the child settled into stone within its mother, a silent sculpture of Eva's greatest wish. It could have stayed with her for ever, unnoticed, harmless, but nine long years of tending to a boy radiating distressed psienergy had wrought physical mutation, diverting new blood to the stone child and regenerating dead tissue. Slowly, the foetus had started growing again. From his hospital bed, Steven Jericho had transmuted Glamour to physical effect, giving his poor mother what she most wanted: a child of her own. Its unceasing murmur had driven Mrs Jericho insane, many years ago.

Now, as the lithopaedian lurched into the world, the Doctor saw Mrs Jericho die because she wanted to die. Her terror could not be borne.

The Doctor turned his eyes away from the simultaneous birth and death.

Around him, his instructions to the N-form were at last obeyed as Mrs Jericho's control perished and the intertrigo illuminated the withdrawal of material into the pocket dimension. Metal slithered back through engrams, abandoning the flesh.

Even as the throne room's grotesque architecture folded into thin air, the machine gently lowered the Doctor, Eva and the lithopaedian to the ground, as if its circuits, though built for War, could understand the tragedy being enacted. Perhaps the N-form even pitied the woman it had loved.

Eva lay on the rubble, staring up at the red night sky. She knew that she was dying and Voice was dying also. The little man stood above her, but could not meet her eyes. 'Doctor,' whispered Eva, 'can it end, now?' He did not reply.

He looked away to allow mother and child a final dignity.

She clutched the abomination to her breast and knew it to be the real Steven Jericho. But the golden place was gone and their happiness had been stolen away. The barren, ordinary world had returned around her, a realm of smoke and blood, stinking of desolation. The child shuddered, made a weak, mewl-ing noise, and was still.

Mrs Jericho hugged her son and whispered his name. She craned her head forward to kiss his wet, open skull. As she leant back, her tears bluffed the sky.

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She closed her eyes, desperate to catch the ghost-sun of the Alto Adige on her face one last time, hoping that death would transport her and Steven to a lasting paradise. But as she fell into darkness, she heard only shrill laughter, mocking Eva Dalloway and her newborn monster. It was the voice of Sally Hunt, somewhere in the world, surviving her.

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Chapter 14

28 July 1987

At ten past midnight, Chris found David and his landlord, Harry Harvey. The east wall of the Quadrant was the only one left standing, though it groaned ominously and rubble crumbled through the floors. The ceiling had collapsed on the inhabitants of flat 28, but the bed had prevented them from being crushed and formed a shelter. Chris lifted timbers off them and he saw an old wound in Harry Harvey's chest. It seemed to be healing, as though tired of blood. David was lacerated and bruised, but smiling.

'Mitch is going to kill me,' he said weakly, lifting up a sleeve of torn shirt.

Mr Harvey did not seem to notice Chris. Cradled in David's lap, he kept muttering at David, 'Just the same, we're just the same.' David cast a sarcastic

'he's mad' look at Chris, but Harry seemed blissful. Then the old man seemed to find new strength. He looked round, into David's face. He said simply, 'I'm sorry.'

Reluctantly, David smiled. 'Don't be daft.'

Chris told Harry to sit still, in case he aggravated the wound, but Harry started to chuckle. 'Don't you see? I've got my second chance. To start again.

Properly, this time. An honest life. Ohh, and David, I'll make more noise than you, just you wait.' He looked at the devastation and his

face was radiant as though in Harry's eyes, the world was newborn and wondrous.

The Doctor held Bev Tyler's hand and talked nonsense to her, saying anything, trying to keep her awake. He had followed Roz's cries to find her and moved Bev to safety as the west wall gave up its fight and caved in. The Doctor had pressed certain bones and laid his hands on either side of Bev's skull, trying to heal the damage, but he could feel the torn veins inside her head. There was only so much he could do. She kept slipping in and out of consciousness.

The Doctor knew that ambulances would be a long time coming, if any still existed in the city. With a quiet anger, he realized that troops would divert medics from the Quadrant so UNIT could first investigate the site of invasion.

Bev's eyes opened again and she tried to clamber free of the makeshift stretcher. She had these panic attacks every few minutes, as if the memories would not lie still. The Doctor calmed her. She looked into space and asked 199

about her mum. He was silent. She turned her head to him – he placed one hand under her neck, to ease the movement and she stared. Then she said,

'Carl?' The Doctor said nothing. 'Gabriel. . . ?'

'He's alive,' whispered the Doctor. 'He fell, but the wires cushioned him. He hasn't woken up.'

After a pause, Bev turned to face the sky. It was scarlet, reflecting the fires.

She seemed to be deep in thought, then she whispered, 'You knew, didn't you?'

'Knew what?'

'Christmas Eve. Standing in Red Hamlets. Mud on your clothes, just like now. And the look on your face. You knew this was going to happen.'

'How could I?' said the Doctor softly. She just looked at him, at the lights of his eyes.

'You bastard,' said Bev Tyler.

She returned her face to the sky and said no more. The Doctor stayed at her side. At ten minutes to one in the morning, Bev died.

The Doctor closed her eyes. Then he walked to the top of a heap of rubble.

At a distance, Roz was watching him. He looked at her and shook his head.

Roz looked down then turned to the city, as did the Doctor, both standing astride separate mounds of the Quadrant's ruin, silhouetted against clouds of red and black.

The streets were still burning, though the fire had halted at the river. The Doctor could see flames reaching to the horizon, stopping only at the moors.

Distant cries could still be heard. The dimensional upheaval had stirred the atmosphere; the back of summer was broken and low clouds brought a fine drizzle over the wasteland. A cold wind stirred the ruins.

Shivering, Roz joined the Doctor and they watched the landscape together.

Before their eyes, the city was ceasing to exist; for all that Roz knew, history declared that this should happen, and the Doctor's web of time remained intact. She considered that thousands had died, but Earth had been spared. A victory of sorts, which perhaps only the Doctor could understand.

Roz tried to sound hopeful. 'With all of this destroyed, what about the causal loop? Have we broken it?'

'No, it leads us on,' said the Doctor, his voice sombre. 'We aren't yet done with the psi-inheritance of the human race. From what the Capper said, our path leads to the future, to find those who reactivated the N-form. If he's right, then it's a time of War. Want to come?'

She laughed at the question, though the sound seemed disrespectful in the Quadrant's hollow. 'You bet,' said Roz. 'It's worth the journey. Perhaps there, we'll find an ending and lay this thing to rest.'

They fell silent again as the twin towers at the city centre collapsed in a slow cascade of girders and concrete. Then Roz looked behind her, at the remains of the Jericho family, and the Doctor followed her stare.

'A lithopaedlan,' he said. 'A stone child. In itself, an entirely human condition. Nothing to do with psi-powers or alien intervention. It's a complication of extrauterine pregnancy, a foetus created outside the womb with no chance of survival, but staying lodged inside the body. Such a thing could rest within the mother for the rest of her natural life, causing no harm.'

Roz swore quietly, then said, 'It was always inside her. From the beginning.'

'Long since calcified. Perhaps preventing a further pregnancy, so the Jerichos turned to adoption. But they bought a boy whose mind could reach inside Eva and bring the child back to life. It must have caused her unimaginable pain, but she contained it. She wouldn't trust a doctor, not after the nightmare of one miscarriage after another. She must have had phenomenal strength. A remarkable woman.' Then the Doctor straightened and lifted his face towards the night. 'Or perhaps. I wonder. It's quite common for adoptive parents to conceive their own children after adoption. The lithopaedian could have been entirely conceived and fossilized under Steven Jericho's psi-influence. Perhaps giving Eva a child so that Steven could be free, perhaps re-creating the brother he so desperately missed. A child of the disaster.'

Roz and the Doctor looked at the Quadrant. In the shadow of broken walls, corpses lay all around. The living moved quietly, for fear of disturbing the dead from their rest. At the east wall, Chris was carrying Mr Harvey to safety, David following. Gabriel Tyler lay on a wooden pallet, comatose. His eyes were open but unseeing. The only other survivors were the Fisher-D'Souza family, who had run at the first signs of trouble to hide themselves in the tall, cylindrical bins; Mrs Skinner, who sifted through the wreckage of her flat as though making sure that her husband was dead, and Irene Leather, who had crammed herself into a kitchen cabinet in her ground-floor flat, just inches away from the N-form's base. Now, the first soldiers were beginning to pick their way across the rubble. By instinct alone, they stayed away from the carcass of Eva Jericho and her stone child.

Roz watched Mrs Leather scavenging through the wreckage. She had a cigarette in her mouth and a peg bag slung over one shoulder. Every so often she would stop, find something of value and put it in the bag.

Roz turned away as she picked up someone's jaw-bone and examined it for gold teeth.

'The world's been saved,' muttered Roz in a low voice. 'But it doesn't feel like it. What a mess.'

'We'll see,' said the Doctor. 'Time will tell.'

'Bollocks,' said Roz.

The Doctor remained inscrutable. He seemed to be staring at David Daniels, 201

as the boy insisted upon giving Chris a hug. In doing so, David bumped his head against Chris's infected ear and Chris winced. Then he smiled and returned the embrace. Chris looked embarrassed as he saw the Doctor watching, but the ghost of a smile seemed to illuminate the Doctor's face from within.

24 December 1977

The Doctor stepped from the TARDIS, which had materialized atop a rubbish-filled skip. He trod gingerly on to the wet mattress, then jumped to the floor, rainwater splashing at his feet. He consulted his watch and waited for a moment. Around him, the night was silent, as though ordinary noise had been suspended for his purpose.

He looked back at the ship. A simple door concealing a universe of secrets.

Perhaps not so unique after all.

Within, Roz and Chris were in the Cloister Room, ready to begin the next journey. Upon returning to the TARDIS, the Doctor had caused excitation within the vortex to incinerate the pocket dimension. The N-form's hull had rolled and burnt, a shipwreck on a sea of flame.

Next, the Doctor had shifted the TARDIS to hover above Colombia, 1983, confirming that the Vampire waveform mimic itself had not activated the N-form. It was no accident and no coincidence; it never was. As the Capper had claimed, a deliberate reactivation impulse had been sent from the future, perhaps reaching other N-forms – the TARDIS indicated that an N-form had been destroyer of the first Quoth homeworld. The Doctor had traced the signal, but it was intelligent and dispersed before he could get a fixed reading.

The remaining energy signature drifted towards the thirtieth century and they would follow. Roz and Chris were going home.

His companions had changed clothes and healed their wounds, but the Doctor's clothes were still soaked in sewage and a trickle of dried blood ran from the pinpoint in his forehead where Mrs Jericho had made contact. The wheel of time had to be closed and he could not delay this moment. If he did, then he might avoid it for ever.

He looked up, into the night, and the players took their positions. Winnie Tyler emerged from the Quadrant stairwell, her child in her arms, wrapped against the cold. Winnie kept her head down, crying bitterly. The Doctor walked to the mouth of the Red Hamlets alleyway and saw her stand with Thomas under the streetlight.

A little girl appeared, hugging the stairwell's shadow, frightened of being seen. Her face edged into the ambient light. Bev Tyler, four years old, stared into the Christmas night with wide, scared eyes. She wore only a T-shirt. Her 202

feet were dirty and wet.

The Doctor took one step forward. Bev looked at his sad and ancient face.

She was solemn, as if seeing many things. Then the Doctor and the little girl turned to watch the woman giving her new-born son to the tall man. Around them, there fell the first spirals of a weak snow which would never settle.

27 April 1963

The schoolgirls' laughter is mocking and shrill as they push the shy, quiet girl out of the gang, towards the shop. The ringleader, thin, blonde and imperious, looks at the girl, defying her to turn back.

The girl enters the shop and the gang stand at a distance, watching from a bench in the town square. Their laughter can still be heard.

The girl looks around. Two women discuss blouses and the manager, a plump, sweating man, dances in attendance. In the far corner, a man with wavy hair and a silk cravat is deep in thought. None of them looks at the girl.

Quickly, her hands shaking, she takes a velvet shirt off the rack and bundles it under her school jumper. She knows it is not well hidden –

it almost makes her look pregnant – but panic urges her out of the shop.

She walks to the door. She can see her peers outside, staring. Then she feels a hand on her shoulder. The manager is shouting and he shoves his hand inside her clothing. She feels violated, then starts crying as he pulls out the red velvet shirt.

She is being taken to the office when she sees the man with wavy hair step forward. She thinks he is about to say something, perhaps to say it's a mistake, Eva's done nothing wrong and he'll pay for the shirt. But the man with wavy hair stops, says nothing and she is led away.

She can hear the laughter from outside, mocking and shrill.

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Appendices

Appendix (i)

11 May 1974, memo from Sam Davey to Michael Hayes, attached to but not documented within the case file of Alfred and Eva Jericho: Mike

The Jerichos are going to appeal against the decision next month, so here's the file. Good luck!

Strictly off the record – be warned! I stand by the decision, but the Jerichos have got good lawyers.

Mrs Jericho seems to think that her police record – one little shoplifting offence in 1963 – is the reason we've turned them down as adoptive parents.

I've told her that's not so, but she's convinced otherwise. Even called me a liar.

Look at the couple's profile. Alfred Jericho's never there, literally. He works in the City while missus stays at home. Mrs Jericho would practically be a single mother. He's a nice enough man and he'll do anything for his wife – that's the point, he's doing it for his wife, not himself. I really wouldn't be happy allowing a kid into that situation, for all their money.

I've met dozens of Alfred Jerichos over the years. They want something, they can't make it themselves, so they pick up their wallet,

go out and get it.

It's not adoption. It's shopping.

Appendix (ii)

28 March 1988, UNIT requisition form:

1 Mini Metro, for delivery to Nicholas and Monica Jeffries, on the birth of their daughter.

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Appendix (iii)

18 December 1999, extract from ongoing report into the theft of hard copy UNIT

file Quadrant27787/Doctor:

Verified that prime suspect M. Boisseau flew to Paris 16112199. Surveillance records his meeting with John Beckett at the Montpelier Hotel, 10.45,17112199. Surveillance continues.

John Beckett's known aliases include: Luke Ellis, Dr James Greco, Ben Rat-tigan.

Appendix (iv)

28 July 2017, extracts from UNIT file Quadrant27787, closed and archived on this day. From the summary of chapter 'Lithopaedian' by Sgt. J. Buckley: The earliest recorded case of a stone child dates back to 1200 BC. It should not be regarded as a freak occurrence a true lithopaedian can still occur once in 250,000 pregnancies.

Nowadays, with closer medical supervision and improved diagnostic meth-ods, ectopic gestation can be detected and removed by surgical intervention.

However, the seventies were hardly the Dark Ages. The files of Mrs Jericho's doctor, Gerald O'Brien (deceased), can explain why this went undetected.

Her persistent miscarriages were caused by adhesion of her fallopian tubes, perhaps after an episode of salpingitis. Dr O'Brien speculated that a violent incident could have caused the initial infection. He considered whether Mrs Jericho, as a child or teenager, was involved

in some sort of accident – or even a fight. However, she was reluctant to discuss this further with her GP – their relationship was poor from the start and Mrs Jericho maintained that she had a right to keep her personal history private. But even before the problems with pregnancy, O'Brien thought she was keeping something hidden, that she dreaded something being found, but it remains a mystery.

The situation deteriorated as Mrs Jericho was tormented by each and every miscarriage. She blamed Dr O'Brien for her condition. Certainly, she reacted to the prospect of surgery, or conception of a child by artificial means, with absolute horror. Eventually, she stopped going to him, and there's no evidence that she signed up with another doctor. In O'Brien's notes, he suggested that she was developing a phobia for all things medical.

She then had to spend nine years sitting in hospitals.

The irony has to be noted. Eva Jericho was terrified of Doctors.

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Extracts from Quadrant27787 summary:

The remains of Eva Jericho's body tissue are to be preserved at Porton Down.

Thirty years later, Gabriel Tyler has not woken from his persistent vegetative state, though MRI scans indicate that his mind remains active.

There is no explanation for the constant twitch of his head.

From Quadrant27787, 'Continuing Research': memo from Harry Sullivan (former Chief of Staff, MI5) to Dr Callum Jeffries (UNIT), received 15 June 2015: Don't know if this is relevant, but –

Since the advent of compulsory blood tests for HIV (11112014), the BHO's been carrying out random tag tests, and they've come across a rather interesting donor. He tested positive for HIV, but there seems to be a metagenic compound anchored to the muramyl peptides, stimulating the immune system. It's possible the compound could be acting as an antivirus. The boys at BHO are very excited – though it's only applicable to HIV1 at the moment and it's going to take them a couple of years to unpick the protein coat. But if they're successful, we can manufacture the antivirus ourselves.

The donor's blissfully unaware of what he's been carrying round in his blood and seems to have no idea where the compound originated. I'm only sending this to you because of his name. He's David Daniels, one of the survivors of Quadrant27787. His lodger, Mr Harold Harvey, is also undergoing tests – he's from the Quadrant as well, a sprightly gent, eighty-five years old.

The Doctor once told me, 'Out of evil, there must come something good.'

Memo in 'Miscellaneous', from Col. Marcie Hatter: With the file due to be archived tomorrow, I'd like this on the official record.

For thirty years, we've been sifting through Eva Jericho's body, cell by cell, looking for remnants of extraterrestrial technology. Much to the chagrin of Weapons Div, nothing's been found, thank God. I think, with the closing of Quadrant27787, we should look again at the cause of events that summer.

Mainly, I'm concerned with our treatment of the late Mrs Jericho – and my official complaint is already on record concerning the language used in reference to the woman in our documentation. Cheap insults such as 'bitch', etc., aren't going to help us understand the tragedy of that day.

There are plenty of experts in Quadrant27787 discussing Eva's motives and aims, but if we're looking for blame, two people seem to have escaped criticism, and they should be listed here.

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Jacob Tyler left his wife in June 1977. He knew that she was pregnant, but made no effort to pay his debts. Quadrant27787 often assumes they were divorced; they were not. After his wife's death, he applied to the courts to be given Winnie Tyler's accounts. In November 1988, he was granted the

£30,000 plus eleven years' interest. With his brother John, he invested in a security firm in Leeds. It was a moderate success.

He remarried in October 1996. There is a new Mrs Tyler and Tyler children.

Now retired and comfortable, Jacob Tyler has not once visited his son Gabriel.

Finally, the diaries Eva wrote at Steven Jericho's bedside are difficult to read – they vary from formal accounts to illegible scrawls. But various references are made to a Sally Hunt. I've researched this, and while this information doesn't vindicate Eva – quite the opposite, you might argue – it shows how the nightmare of Quadrant27787 started long before the Jericho and Tyler families came together.

Sally Hunt was a schoolgirl at St Barnabas, in the same year as Eva Dalloway. In the summer of 1963, on the last day of term, Sally Hunt was found unconscious on the canal path. She had been beaten with a blunt object, perhaps a brick. She regained consciousness and told police that her attacker came from behind and could not be identified. The report indicates that she may have been lying, obeying a schoolgirl rule which dictated that no girl should betray another. Sally's knuckles were bruised, indicating that she did fight back, though she denied this.

Sally Hunt seemed to recover. She was taken home to her parents in Knightsbridge. She later collapsed from a subdural haematoma, a result of the attack. She lost the power of speech and the use of her right side. Her parents looked after her until the mother's death in 1998. Sally Hunt was moved to a private nursing facility.

She lives there still.

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